

When: Pre-OotP

Summary: During Harry's fourth year, what if Ginny had asked Harry how he was feeling when her brother turned his back on Harry? What if she had tried to befriend him then? How would that have affected Harry and his other friends? To cover Harry's fourth year, and an epilogue.

Rating: PG-13

Category: Drama, Romance

(A/N: Here's a little "what if" fun that I came up with. Like all true H/G shippers, it's so much more fun to get them together earlier than in canon. :-) An interesting tidbit: This story was actually written before "Unchampion", but it has just now has made its way off my hard drive and is slowly working its way through beta. At this time, I think my posting schedule will be on dates that end in "0"; so at 6 chapters long, you should see the whole story in about 2 months. If the beta/editing process should speed up, I will post the story faster.

This story just sort of came to me one evening. The fun thing is that I only had to change a couple of small events up front, tweak 1 character just slightly, and then let it all go. The final form you see here is due to the skillful wielding of a scalpel by moshpit (Josh) to help me explore a different writing style. (I also had to sponge up a lot of red ink, but I like the final result. :-) I owe a huge debt to Josh for his time and efforts with this story, as well as having fun discussing stories and writing. Thanks Josh!

I hope you have fun reading this.

Like all other fanfic, the Harry Potter world belongs to JKR, I'm just borrowing it for a short while for fun. No profits will ever be made with this.

Note on day/dates: In my version of GoF, the drawing is at the Halloween Feast, but the next day is Sunday (GoF ch-18). The reason I bring that up is to head off problems with my dates. In 1994, Oct 31st is really on a Monday. As this is a world of magic, I suppose

JKR can have fun with the calendar, but I'm going to pretend the Dumbledore picks the nearest Saturday night for the Feast so I can follow the real calendar to keep track of where I am. In thinking about this a bit and in looking at the real calendar, it appears that JKR used the calendar for 1992 when she wrote GoF, or at least the dates and the days of the week seem to match very nicely that way. The Hogsmeade weekend and Sirius's note have the same sort of problem, as do other parts I'm sure.)

A Friend Indeed Chapter 1: Friends, Old and New

(Sun 30 Oct 1994)

Harry sat on a couch in front of a small fire in the Gryffindor common room on a cool, but otherwise pleasant, day. Dinner would be served soon, but he was not sure how much he really wanted to eat. Of course, a lot of that feeling was based on the new circumstances he found himself in. He unwillingly reflected on the misery he had accumulated in the last twenty-four hours, which had given him one more dire situation in life.

The year had gone as well as could be expected until last night at the Halloween Feast. That was when his name had floated out of the Goblet of Fire as the unprecedented fourth Triwizard Tournament Champion. Harry had to admit that he had small dreams of being the champion, much like everyone else, but he had not seriously considered entering. He was not old enough or experienced enough to compete. Yet, now he had no choice in the matter. That was the first problem, contributing a substantial portion of the sense of overwhelming frustration and anger.

Leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees, he ran his hands through his hair as he considered the second major problem he now had. Ron was not speaking to him anymore. This morning, Hermione had explained about Ron's position in the family and how that made Harry's best friend feel jealous of almost everything, but Harry did not think that should have come between them. They were best mates, or they were supposed to be. Before dinner last night, he would have sworn that nothing could change that fact, but now he was not so certain. A small part of his brain reminded him that they were both

only fourteen, not quite grown up yet, but this non-speaking fight seemed overly childish to Harry. He felt that he really needed the support of his best mate since it was clear everyone else would be verbally beating up Harry. Harry was at a loss as to why Ron would not see such a simple truth. Harry knew he would have stuck by Ron if their positions had been reversed.

While these two recent developments battled to give him no peace, he knew the third problem was no less significant. There was the recurring misery of the pain-filled dreams, the ones that he knew were visions where people were planning to kill him. They had started earlier in the summer, and he knew Voldemort was up to something, but not what.

Ginny Weasley came down the stairs from her dorm, en route for dinner. She was a few minutes early, but that was all right; she had nothing better to do right now. As she got to the bottom of the stairs, however, she noticed a certain raven-haired boy over by the fireplace running his fingers through his hair. In other moments, she would admit that it was something she had always wanted to do. At that time, however, she could tell that either he was particularly upset or nervous about something. He looked like he was ready to pull his hair out, or perhaps curse the furniture.

Normally, she would have walked on by, gaze averted, but there was something about how he held himself that screamed a need for a friend. She also knew her prat of a brother was not being a friend at all based on the glares between Harry and Ron earlier in the day, but she was surprised Hermione was not there. Perhaps her brother was getting a lecture, which left Harry to wallow in his silent troubles. With a deep breath for strength, Ginny decided she would try to act on the advice Hermione gave her during the summer -- be a friend to Harry, and get over the shyness that was so debilitating.

Hermione had told her that she needed to get over her crush, as crushes rarely worked out. Harry needed friends, but like most fourteen year-old boys, he did not know what to do with a girlfriend. Ginny thought that certainly described her brother, Ron, though she was not so sure how Hermione knew this so well since the brunette had never had a boyfriend before.

Slowly making her way over to Harry, Ginny sat in the chair next to him and put on her very best 'I'm normal' face -- the face normally reserved for right after she had pulled a prank. Tentatively, she asked, "Harry? Is something wrong?" She watched him raise his head just long enough to see who she was.

"Yeah -- everything."

His head was back in his hands, but Ginny was enough of a student of Harry to know that any answer other than 'fine' meant he had major troubles. The problem was that she had no idea if he would even consider her someone to talk to beyond basic pleasantries, let alone someone to confide in.

"Well, if you share, maybe I can help," she offered with a half-smile that she hoped did not appear forced. That sounded like a friendly thing to do, and she would normally do that to the other third year girls that were having a problem. She had even done that for her brothers in the past, so she hoped it was the right thing to do for Harry.

Harry did not even bother to look up at her. "I don't think so. I mean, how can I convince people I didn't really enter myself in the Tournament? I doubt anyone but Dumbledore or Moody believe me, and Moody thinks someone did it to try to get me killed."

That was shocking to Ginny. The idea that someone would try to use the Tournament to kill Harry seemed strange, given how strangely complex a plot would have to be to succeed. At the same time, she had heard Hermione discuss in depth how many contestants had been killed in prior Tournaments, so there was some logic in the idea.

"What do you think, Ginny?" She snapped back to the present to find Harry expectantly looking at her. "Do you think I entered myself?" Harry had never talked with her much, just a few snatches of conversation here and there over the summers or during a school year, but now he was suddenly asking to know her opinion.

That was a loaded question with few easy ways out, if Ginny was to be honest with herself or Harry. With a sigh, she knew she had to be candid, but doing this with her shaking resolve to try and be herself with Harry was not easy. "Honestly? I'm not sure what to think, Harry. I suppose the easy answer is what everyone else thinks. But from what I know of you, I don't think you did. It just doesn't sound like the real you." Ginny had to fight to keep herself from blushing heavily at that statement, but she only paused for a moment. Years of acting to pull off pranks against or with her brothers had managed to get her this far, and she knew she just had to keep pushing on. "I know few people actually listened to you last night, but I heard you say you didn't do it. So I believe that's the truth." On some level, she realized she was almost rambling and thinking out loud, but Harry looked content to wait her out.

"Thanks, Ginny. You don't know how much that means to me."

It was all she could do not to blush at his painful sincerity. She knew if she let herself focus on what he said, she would be completely unable to continue. Ignoring the warmth she knew was about to grace her cheeks, she pushed the topic back to Harry's apparent woes. "I don't mean to sound callous, Harry, but putting up with what the others believe doesn't sound all that bad. You've had to deal with that before, sadly, and certainly isn't a reason for you to be pulling your hair out. You've always been proven correct in the end."

He gave a sad, hollow laugh. "No, that's only the first of three problems I'm trying to get my mind around."

Ginny paused for a moment. While Harry had revealed one problem, which was a novelty in itself, she was uncertain if she should push him to talk about the others. She wondered if he would really open up to her, or if she had truly caught him in a talkative mood. "So what else is so bad?"

She watched as Harry ran his hands through his hair. Whatever was at the root of his problems was clearly something that made him upset, and the way he kept his eyes on her left her wondering if he would trust her or not. "I had a dream this summer about Voldemort ... he was telling someone to get me for some plan of his. I don't know

what he wants, but it can't be good. If someone's not trying to kill me in the Tournament, then they probably will be for him."

Ginny did not gasp at the name of the Darkest Wizard in recent history, although she did not say the "V" name herself -- yet. Her experiences in her first year here with the sixteen year-old Tom Riddle helped her over part of the name-induced fright, but she also had a healthy respect for the power and knowledge that Riddle possessed. "All right, I could see where that would be something that might worry you. Dumbledore is here as is Professor Moody, right? But considering what's happened to you in the past, I can see your reason for caution. It's not bad to be cautious, but if you tell them, they might help. Have you told anyone you trust about it?"

Harry shrugged absently. "Yeah, I told ... someone. He said he'd look into it."

Ginny wondered briefly who Harry had told, as it clearly was not Ron or Hermione -- and from the tone, it was unlikely to be Professor Dumbledore, either. "Alright, then, trust them to do what they said. Now, what's the third thing bothering you?" Ginny was proud of herself for maintaining an even and calm tone as she tried to soothe him. She was uncertain he actually was calming down, but at least he had some of his normal posture back.

Harry was quiet for a moment and Ginny wondered if his talkative mood had ended as abruptly as it began. Harry finally let out a sigh, and she was sad to see him looking almost lost. "You might be able to help me with this one. Do you know why your brother won't speak to me anymore?"

Ginny paused to rifle through her memories of the day. "I noticed he didn't sit near you this morning or at lunch, but I didn't realize he wasn't talking to you. He didn't tell you why?"

Harry shook his head, and she saw that lost look become a little stronger. "Not really. Last night, he was angry at me because he thought I put my name in the Goblet and didn't tell him how he could put his name in too, or so he said. When I told him I didn't put my name in, he didn't believe me and just got angrier. We shouted at

each other a bit. It's stupid, I thought he was one of my best friends, but he doesn't believe me and ... and that hurts, you know?"

Ginny sighed, as she knew far too well what the problem was. She did not want to have to explain this, but maybe it would help Harry understand why Ron acted the way he did sometimes. "He's jealous, Harry."

Harry leaned back in his chair and looked at her levelly. "That's what Hermione tried to explain to me this morning. But I don't understand, at least not fully. Sure, there's some fame attached to being in the tournament, but it's going to be bloody hard, and may be literally bloody on my part." He groaned. "I'm only a fourth year. How do they expect me to live through this?" he asked rhetorically and with exasperation in his voice.

Ginny thought that for Harry, it was all but whining. "That's true, but there's also the prize money enticing him. Harry, don't underestimate Ron's desire to make a name for himself. I can name something special about each of my brothers, from Bill down to the twins. But when you get to Ron, he hasn't found a way to stand out yet, to be seen as someone special too."

Harry had a look of disbelief on his face, and Ginny knew that this was not going to become any easier to explain. "Ginny, he's fourteen. He hasn't had time to do anything special..."

"But you have, Harry." She continued to be calm and logical, hoping that it would help Harry truly hear what she was trying to tell him.

Harry snorted. "Yeah, right," he said sarcastically. "I'm famous for something I have no memory of, something my mother did that I don't even know about. I was one year old!"

Ginny tried to think of another way to explain it, but it all came back to Ron being envious for what Harry himself disliked. "Harry, Ron doesn't see it that way. He sees that you're famous, that people look at you differently. You stand out, you're unique," she tried to explain, but it was obvious Harry was not buying it.

Harry's tone was surprising to her with how much anger was in it. "He can have my fame if he wants it. I'll trade places with him any day he wants. He can have my fame and the Dursleys, and I'll take his family and normalcy."

"Maybe you should tell him that," Ginny suggested after a moment of silence. "Maybe that would open his eyes."

Harry gave a small shrug, and deflated before her eyes. "Maybe, if I could get him to listen to me."

"Give him some time, he eventually will." Ginny surprised herself that she had forgotten about putting up a facade and her effort to be more casual around Harry. She had become so engrossed in the conversation, she had stopped acting. With a feeling of having a small triumph in hand, she let a conspiratorial smile come upon her face as a devious idea came to her. "So in the meantime, Harry, would you like to have a new friend?"

Harry had a faint spark in his eyes as he shrugged. "Sure, but who?"

She rolled her eyes, suddenly understanding what Hermione meant about how clueless Harry could be at times. "Me, you prat."

For the first time that day, Harry smiled, and it made Ginny happy that she had achieved that. "You're already my friend, Ginny." Then his expression darkened. "Uh, Ginny, I suppose I should apologize to you about that."

Ginny could not find any connection between his two statements, and she knew her confusion showed after she tried to puzzle it out. "Apologize for what?"

"Well, I haven't been a very good friend to you," he admitted. "I'm sorry I didn't ... well, help out more the past couple of years."

Secretly, Ginny was thrilled to hear that, yet she knew that even if he had tried, she would have been unable to handle it. "Harry, you don't have anything to be sorry for, truly. I'm a year younger and I have a different circle of friends." As she reflected on why she would have

had a hard time accepting Harry's help before, she started to blush slightly. "Well, and I didn't really make it easy on you to be my friend." As she felt her blush become stronger, she realized that she still could not be totally normal around him, at least not without significantly more practice.

Harry was apparently adept at being clueless, for he seemed oblivious to her struggle to maintain her composure. "Maybe, maybe not, but I still could have been more friendly."

"You were never rude, Harry."

"Still, I could have been friendlier." Harry's stomach rumbled loudly, and Ginny giggled when he looked at his abdomen as if there was a monster that he was trying to stare down.

After getting her amusement under control, she stood up. "Okay, friend, let's go to dinner. It started a few minutes ago so we really should be going anyway." She waited for him to stand, before they started walking to the portrait together.

"So, Harry, what did they tell you that you have to do for the Tournament? Can we help you?"

As they walked out the Portrait hole, Harry sighed dramatically. "Yeah, my friends are allowed to help me train. I think I'll need that desperately." As they walked on, Harry's voice dropped in volume. "They said the first task was supposed to be on the 24th of November. It's supposed to test bravery and courage."

Ginny thought about that for a moment, primarily focusing on all the things she knew Harry had already done requiring those two traits. "Did they say how?"

"No, that's the courage part. We're supposed to figure it out on our own when it happens. I'm going to be so ..." he finally just faded out.

"Screwed?" she supplied helpfully.

Harry smiled again as they reached the bottom of the stairs, and he reflected on how nice Ginny was being to him. "Yeah, that word probably works just as well as what I was thinking." They laughed together and Harry realized he was feeling a lot better than he had been before she sat down with him in the common room. "Ginny, thanks for talking to me when you didn't have to."

Her smile was simple but honest, and he was glad to see she was feeling happy too. "Sure, Harry, that's what friends are for. You'd help me if I needed it, wouldn't you?"

They walked for a few more seconds, nearing the Great Hall, and Harry thought about what she asked. "I did once, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat, Ginny."

Harry saw Ginny pale slightly as she caught his reference to her first year. When she stopped walking just before they entered the Great Hall, he stopped with her, the noise from all the students eating easily heard through the open doors. Ginny's voice lost the humor that it had held during their conversation, and she sounded almost afraid. "I never want you to have to do that again, Harry."

Harry tried to reassure her with a smile, but he knew he needed to explain it. "I know. I don't want to do it again either, but I would." As she started to reply, he overrode her words with a gesture. "That's what friends are for, Ginny. Come on, let's eat."

Ginny slowly smiled back at him, understanding what he was telling her, and took a few quick steps to catch up with him as he turned and continued into the Great Hall. Ginny wondered if this was what Hermione meant for her to do.

As they walked into the Great Hall, a number of heads started turning their way and the murmurs started. Ginny could see Harry starting to withdraw into himself again, and it saddened her more than she would ever tell him. She liked how alive and normal he had seemed a few minutes ago, as it was much like he had been at The Burrow.

He stopped walking about half-way down the Gryffindor table, clearly not sure where to sit. Ginny saw Ron was sitting near Dean and

Seamus, while Hermione was a few seats farther down, and Neville was across from her. "Over here, Harry. Sit by Neville." With a small push on his back, Harry moved to the spot she indicated and sat down, while she sat down next to him.

Hermione looked at Ginny, obviously analyzing the situation. After a moment, she smiled at her friend before turning to Harry. "How are you doing Harry?"

"Fine," he told her his usual answer. Ginny knew that the open and talkative Harry was gone for the moment, so she poured some pumpkin juice for him, hoping he would take that cue to start dishing out food for himself. She was pleased to see that he did exactly that while she poured her own juice in turn. It was a fairly quiet meal for the four of them, except when Hermione asked everyone if they had done all of their homework for tomorrow. Harry sheepishly admitted he still had an essay for Binns left, but under Hermione's stare he promised he would finish it after dinner.

Ginny listened quietly for the most part, not used to sitting with the others during meals at school. It was when Neville commented to Harry about the Durmstrang students that the conversation picked up. "They seem a bit intimidating to me," Neville commented.

"I suppose I can understand, at least at first impression," Harry said after a moment. "But look a bit closer and I think you'll find they're a lot like us. Stand up straight and don't flinch when you look at them and you'll be fine." Ginny found herself nodding along with Hermione.

"That's easy for you to say, Harry," the shy boy told his friend, "you're a Champion."

Harry snorted, disbelief evident on his face. "I may have had a bit more fighting experience than you, Neville, but I don't think I'm significantly better." Ginny was curious to know why Harry would say that, since she knew he was quite a bit better with spell work than Neville.

"Harry," Hermione interrupted, "you're the best person in our Defense class for a reason."

Ginny caught the edge of Harry's disappointed look at Hermione, which was unexpected. When she saw his head nod faintly in the direction of Neville, who now was looking at the table quietly, she realized what he was doing.

Hermione appeared to catch on even faster, her friend's face taking on a smile as the bright witch looked back at Neville. "But you're right, Neville isn't far behind. I bet he could do as well as you with a little more practice." Ginny was happy to see Neville look back up, a mixture of disbelief and hope obvious on his face. She saw Hermione flash a smile before turning back to Harry, as her countenance became almost as stern as McGonagall's. "Speaking of which, you are going to train for your tasks, aren't you?"

Harry winced slightly, and Ginny knew everyone was uncomfortable when Hermione locked on to you as a target. "Yeah, Ginny suggested that." After a moment of stirring the remains of his dinner on his plate, Harry brightened slightly. "Hey, there's an idea. Would the three of you help me train? Aside from helping me, you lot could learn new things, too."

Hermione looked like someone had just given her a first edition of Hogwarts: A History. "Great idea, Harry. We just have to make sure that it doesn't interfere with our homework."

Ginny wanted to laugh at Hermione's predictability with regards to homework, but she managed to drink some of her juice instead. She saw Harry give her a faint smile before he turned back to Neville. "What do you think, Neville? Want to join us?" Harry asked.

Neville was clearly surprised by the question. "I -- I don't know. I don't think I'd be much help," he finally got out.

"Come on, Neville. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Just think, you might even get to learn something that would be fun to try on Malfoy." As Ginny heard an intake of breath from Hermione, Harry apparently heard it too. She saw his head turn to Hermione as he shot her look that said, "Don't." Hermione seemed to deflate after

a moment, though it was apparent that it had been hard for her to bite her tongue.

"Well, OK, I guess," Neville finally agreed.

Ginny was happy to see that Neville's response made Harry smile again. Harry look at each of them in turn, before he announced whatever he was thinking about. "Excellent! Let's talk about it on our way back." Since the group was already done with dinner, they walked back to Gryffindor Tower talking about their new practice sessions. As times were suggested for possible practice sessions, Harry always made sure to check with Ginny as to whether it would work for her schedule, since she had different classes than they did. As they approached the common room, it was finally decided that Tuesday night would be their first time.

When they arrived at the Tower, Harry's demeanor was almost completely different from before Ginny had found him when she came down for dinner. In an almost cheerful tone, he said, "I'm going up to read my history so I can write that essay for Binns. Good-night, all, I'll see you in the morning." As they all bid him good-night as well, he looked specifically at Ginny. "Thanks for everything," was all he said as he left them. His simple thanks left Ginny once again fighting to control her rising blush, frustrated that even when things seemed to be going well, Harry could always get a reaction out of her.

Neville left to go join a game of Gobstones that was already in progress, while Hermione went upstairs to get her book bag, saying she wanted to read ahead in Potions. Ginny decided to do the same thing, except it was Charms for her.

When she made it back to the Common Room, Charms books and papers in hand, she joined Hermione at her table. She passively watched Hermione write some notes based on her Potions textbook, but found her thoughts too fleeting to settle for study just yet. Still having not opened her Charms book after a few minutes, Hermione looked up at Ginny and asked, "It looked like you and Harry were pretty friendly tonight."

This time Ginny was unable to stop the blush that came to her face. "Yeah. I ... I saw him here on the way to dinner." She paused to try and think of some way to explain what happened. "He looked like he wasn't feeling too well. Like he was really upset over something." Shaking her head at the memory of Harry before she talked to him and as he went up to work on his assignments, she was glad that she had helped him feel a little better. "I remembered what you told me over the summer, and ... and I tried. I sat down and tried to be a friend, and it worked!" Her blush, which had slowly been receding, came back in full force. "In some ways, I can't believe I did that. I'd go thank Fred and George for helping me with my acting skills, but they'd want to know why and demand some sort of payment."

Hermione laughed lightly. "Keep it up Ginny. No one can guarantee what will happen, but be a friend to Harry and he'll always be there for you. Also, if you keep acting, you may find after a while that it's all natural and there is no need to act."

That was an interesting thought, and one that kept coming back to Ginny for the rest of the night.

The next week had been horrible for Harry. Other than Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, none of the other students believed his protestations that he did not put his name in the Goblet. Hagrid believed him, but that did not really help with the other students. Harry thought he could have survived this much better if only Ron had stood by him, like he had in their second year, but Ron was mostly ignoring him now. Harry had found that when Ron did not actively ignore him, his supposed friend was making fun of him too.

That was when he found what a god-send Ginny was. Several times, she found him in the Common Room by himself, where she would come over and talk to him about normal things: his homework, her homework, spells that might be useful, even Quidditch. Harry found it easier and easier to talk to her, his discomfort from her crush slowly vanishing as they gradually built a friendship knowing each other, rather than about each other.

Throughout his ostracization by the majority of the castle residents, Hermione remained her stalwart supportive self. As she continued to

support Harry, he witnessed Hermione stop helping Ron with homework, either because of Ron's actions around Harry or something else that had left Hermione in a huff one evening. The added benefit to the temporary split between Ron and Hermione was that they fought less. Hermione managed to get more done, and everyone else was thankful they did not have to listen to the frequent bickering.

Their first training session as a group for the tournament had also been useful. Hermione had come prepared with a list of all the spells they had learned in their first three years, as well as all the spells they should learn that year during class. The four friends worked hard together, especially at Summoning Charms, which Harry and Neville had had difficulty with in Flitwick's class earlier that week. Ginny was doing slightly better than they were, which was a little surprising to Hermione considering that Ginny would not have that charm in class for another year.

Harry had penned a long letter to Sirius about being picked, and the subsequent fallout amongst his friends over everything. Unfortunately, the reply was slow in coming back, though Harry hoped that Sirius was still safely hidden and the delay was not due to being on the run.

The biggest incident of the week came in Potions class, which was not a surprise. That was when Malfoy and all of his "friends" showed off their buttons that alternately said "SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY" and "POTTER STINKS!" while gloating over their cleverness. After Harry and Draco had exchanged spells, which ricocheted to hit Goyle and Hermione, Snape arrived and showed his Slytherin colors.

Snape told Hermione nothing was wrong with her, when her front teeth were now so long they extended past her collar. Ron had appeared to be his old self and started shouting at Snape with Harry. They had both lost points and received detention, but Harry's thought that this act might herald the restoration of his best friend was lost. As Harry looked at his friend, hoping they could be normal around each other again, Ron stalked off to join Dean and Seamus.

Harry appreciated Colin coming to rescue him later during the same class for the weighing of the wands, even if he had had a horrible few

minutes with Rita Skeeter. Harry was still devastated over Ron continuing to ignore or avoid him. Fortunately, his devastation prevented him from saying much to Rita before Dumbledore rescued him, though he was uncertain what her acid green Quill was likely to make from his depressed mood.

After the wand inspection, which Harry felt was a bit silly, he went to dinner only to find Hermione was not there. Ginny changed from her place with her friends to sit with Harry and Neville shortly after he sat down, but he was uncertain why until she started a conversation after their collective silence.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

He could hear the concern in her voice, but he only looked down at the food he had slopped onto his plate and been absently pushing around. As he made a thoroughly grey mess out of his food, but not really eating, he slowly described his day. At the end, he pushed his plate forward and put his arms and head down on the table in front of him, not really hungry.

Ginny looked at Neville, and he just nodded back as though in silent agreement that Harry had told it accurately and fairly. She could not believe how badly Harry had it some days; it just was not right for a teacher to act like that. Of course, Ron was being a git-extraordinaire, which was atypical considering the two prominent gits in Harry's life were Malfoy and Snape. Without even realizing what she was doing, she started to rub Harry's back. It was something her mother always did for her and her brothers when they were unhappy or feeling under the weather.

She had been rubbing his back for a few moments while thinking about his problems, when she heard, "That really feels good..."

It was all she could do not to make a surprised sound and to keep up the motion as if this were completely commonplace. Fortunately, Harry did not see her massive blush, but when she glanced at Neville for a moment, she saw him grinning widely at her. Using her other hand, she held a finger up in front of her lips and Neville nodded, before he returned to his dinner, obviously suppressing his mirth.

Ginny knew that Harry had good reason to feel depressed at things, but at the same time, she knew he had to take care of himself. Not eating might be OK for one meal, but he had been eating sparsely ever since being picked as a Champion, and she knew it was slowly taking a toll on him. His obvious enjoyment of her rubbing his back, however, gave her the germ of an idea to fix at least one problem going on.

She stopped her motion and softly said, "Harry, you need to eat something to keep up your strength. You don't have to eat a lot, but eat some food -- let's say ten bites. If you'll eat ten bites for me, I'll rub your back some more if you want." She was not sure what his reaction to that would be, but it was worth a try. Would he see her as helpful, or just one more person forcing him to do something he did not want to do. She knew his stubbornness was incredible from the stories Hermione had relayed through the years.

To Ginny's amazement, Harry slowly sat back up and started eating. He ate over half of his plate before he laid his head back down. Smiling to herself, she started rubbing his back again while she thought about his problems again. Turning to Neville, she softly asked him, "Neville, do you have any ideas about what we could do to help Harry?"

Neville shook his head. "Sorry," he told them both.

Ginny gave a small smile back, then she noticed her twin brothers, who were sitting down the table, stand up to leave. An idea suddenly sprung into her head. "I've got an idea and I need to go check it out. I'll meet you both back in the Common Room later." Jumping up, she left her friends and walked quickly to catch up to her brothers.

Harry raised his head up off of his arms to watch her leave, then looked over at Neville.

"Sorry, Harry," Neville told him. "I'm your friend too, but I'm not rubbing your back."

Harry snorted. "Prat."

"Git." They both started laughing before getting up and slowly making their way back to the Tower. Harry was surprised to find himself in a much better frame of mind now.

Ginny caught up with her brothers just as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Hey, I need to talk with you two."

Fred looked behind him. "Hear something bro?"

"Naw, nothing there. Let's go plan our next prank," George suggested.

"My dear brothers, if you will give me a few minutes, I'll give you an idea for a truly fun prank at Malfoy's expense."

The twins stopped where they were and looked at each other. With a smile, they simultaneously turned, each grabbed one of Ginny's arms, and they promptly escorted her down the hall and into a secret passageway. A wave of each of their wands and she knew the area was protected from their conversation being overheard. Once they were settled, they both looked at her expectantly.

"First, you need to answer a question. Do you believe Harry? Do you think he put his name in the Goblet or not?" Ginny waited while they looked at each other for a few seconds.

"Honestly?" George asked. Ginny nodded. "No, I doubt he really did. We're in sixth year, and if we couldn't figure out how to do it, then we doubt he did."

"We just haven't figured out how it happened. Though, my money is on the idea that he convinced someone older to put his name in for him," Fred said.

"Harry said he didn't do that, and Dumbledore believes him," Ginny countered.

The two boys looked at each other for a little longer, until Fred told her. "I suppose we believe him then, but does it really matter?"

"Yeah, he's in the Tournament," George said.

"It's would mean a lot to him to know that people believe him. Will you please tell him your opinions?"

"We could, but what's in it for us?" George asked.

Ginny smiled. "A fun prank."

"Ooh," Fred said with relish. "That's the 'Ginny got a good Christmas present' smile. What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe public nudity?" George asked with glee.

Ginny shuddered. "Please, by all that's holy, no!" Taking a deep breath to try to cleanse the thought of a naked Malfoy from her head, she told them, "You've seen those buttons Malfoy made?" They nodded. "Can you put a charm on the doorway to the Great Hall so that anyone who is wearing the button and passes through the doorway has their button changed?"

"That could be done..."

"What did you have in mind?"

"You can leave the 'Support Cedric' part, as I don't want too much attention or retribution pointed at Harry, but change the 'Potter Stinks!' part to 'Malfoy Wets His Bed'", Ginny told them. "That should embarrass Malfoy, but be clean enough not to get anyone into too much trouble."

"That might be easy enough..."

"But wouldn't it be more fun to say something more pointed?"

"Sure, I'd love for it to say 'Malfoy Loves Snape', but Snape would get personally involved then, and I'd prefer to deal with him separately," Ginny told them.

"OK, I think we can do that."

"Yeah, it's for a good cause."

"And when you have a good idea for Snape, you come see us."

"Though beware that Snape is very hard to prank."

"I'm sure," Ginny agreed. "I'd like to do something like a charm that makes him say 'points to Gryffindor' when he tries to say 'points from Gryffindor', but that would be too obvious. I need to be subtler."

"Right you are sis."

"So when do you want this charm on the door?"

"As soon as you can," she told them. "Take an extra day or two if you need it, as this needs to be right the first time."

The smiling trio of Weasleys headed back to the Common Room, alternately suggesting outlandish pranks to try against Snape.

(Thu 9 Nov)

Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville arrived at dinner, intending to eat quickly before hurrying to an unused classroom near the Tower to practice spells. Ginny looked up from her dinner just in time to see a small commotion over at the Slytherin table. As she was about ask Harry if he could see what the problem was, one of the Hufflepuffs at the next table started laughing and pointed to himself.

That Hufflepuff had his back to her, but his friend across from the table pushed the button on his chest and she saw it change from 'Support Cedric Diggory' to 'Malfoy Is A Squib'. She almost spewed the juice she had been trying to swallow. With a huge grin on her face, she nudged Harry sitting next to her and pointed to the badge on the Hufflepuff.

Harry snorted and then started chuckling, before he got Hermione and Neville's attention, who were both sitting on the other side of the table, to turn around and look at the badge. "I wonder how that happened."

"You can thank me if you like," she said coyly and blushing only slightly.

Harry stared at her. "You did that?" His voice was soft, as though trying to keep the conversation between the two of them, while Hermione snickered and Neville laughed loudly.

"Not personally, but I convinced a couple of people to do it for you," she confessed, matching his apparent efforts to keep their conversation private.

"Oh, that's why they told me that believed me." Harry's large smile came back. "You're brilliant, Ginny, completely brilliant."

Between his smile and his green eyes looking into hers, Ginny wanted to melt, or else grab his face and snog him senseless. That thought caused her to blush deeply and she turned back to her plate in embarrassment.

"Ginny. Ginny." She still couldn't face him. "Ginny, look at me, please," Harry finally begged her and put his hand on her shoulder. He had never touched her before and she thought that must mean something. Hoping for the best, she finally looked over at him and held her breath. "Thank you, you don't know how much that means to me," she heard him say. It was all she could do not to hug him.

When he returned to his food, Ginny looked over at Hermione. Her brunette friend merely smiled at her.

Their practice session that evening went well, except that Harry was still struggling at Summoning Charms, though he was getting better overall. Ginny knew that he was also struggling with the fact that Ron still had not spoken to him all week. She had talked to him about it, and tried to encourage him to concentrate on the friends he did have, letting Ron have the space he needed to work out whatever his problem was. It did not help that Hermione kept trying to get Harry and Ron back together again, which neither one was ready for. Ginny suspected that there would be no reconciliation until Ron grew up

enough to apologize for saying Harry lied as well as for saying that Harry put his name in the Goblet.

(Sat 19 Nov)

The Saturday before the first task was a Hogsmeade weekend. On the way to the magical village, Hermione started on her lost cause again, and it was not about House-Elves. "Harry, I heard Ron say that he's going to be at the Three Broomsticks for lunch. How about we meet him there?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No," he said simply. As she opened her mouth to try again, Harry went on. "Look, until he apologizes, I don't want anything to do with him and I don't see why I should have to be the one that goes to him."

"He's right, Hermione. Ron's been a real git lately, far more than usual, and I should know," Ginny said.

"I agree," Neville added quietly. "If you could hear some of the things he says in our dorm room, Hermione, I don't think you'd be so nice to him. I wondered about the feud for a little while at first, but I don't anymore. Ron's not acting like a friend at all. I'm just glad he shuts up when Harry is around."

Hermione sighed. "Well, Harry, would you be unhappy with me if I had lunch with Ron?"

"I know you were mad at him and quit helping him with his homework. Did he apologize to you?" Harry asked, wondering if Ron had apologized to her and not to him.

Hermione sighed. "No. I've tried to forgive him anyway so as not to lose our friendship, but I won't help him with his homework until he apologizes for what he said to me."

"Well, that's between the two of you. If you want to go, go," Harry said matter-of-factly. "He's your friend and you can have lunch with whomever you like. My only objection is you trying to make me be his friend right now."

"Thanks Harry," she said as they entered the small town. Hermione's face lit up when she saw a sign ahead. "Look! They're having a sale on quills. Let's go!" She picked up the pace to a very brisk walk, leading the foursome to the first shop.

The other three all smiled and chuckled. Harry was not opposed to going in the store, unlike Ron would have been. That thought caused Harry to think about his friendships again. He absent-mindedly picked up a pack of a dozen quills and some more parchment. Their homework had been using a lot of parchment recently. As he paid for his packages, he felt Ginny tug on his arm to get his attention.

"Harry, what's wrong? You look lost suddenly."

Neville was the last to pay for his supplies, so Harry answered her while their friend cashed out. "I think I just had a personal revelation a few minutes ago, and I'm still trying to absorb it."

"Want to share?" the redhead girl asked while they slowly walked out the door, back into the cool November air. Before he could answer, Hermione and Neville walked up.

"Harry?" Hermione got his attention. "Do you mind if I go meet Ron now?"

"Hermione, you can do whatever you want to. You don't have to ask my permission or anything. You're my friend, and I'll be yours no matter what, right?"

Hermione gave him a brilliant smile as she nodded quickly. "Thanks, Harry. I'll come find you later."

As Hermione started to go, Neville turned to Harry. "I think I'll go with her. I don't want her to have to face that alone."

Harry smiled at his friend's retreating back. "Now that's interesting."

"It is," Ginny agreed. "Hey, you want to sit over there for awhile? That bench looks like it should be out of the wind." Harry shrugged his shoulders.

indifference and followed her over. "Yeah, this is better. So, Harry. What was your revelation?"

Harry looked down for a moment as he tried to decide if he wanted to share this or not. Considering how much he had shared with her over the past few weeks since the Halloween Feast, he decided he might as well. "Only because you're a close friend, you understand?"

Ginny nodded. "I'll keep it to myself, I promise."

"It occurred to me that I didn't mind following Hermione into the store to buy quills, unlike Ron, who would have put up a fight and would have expected me to say something too. That made me think about the influences my friends make on me. I've heard it said that you can tell a lot about a person by their friends."

"I've heard that saying," Ginny told him.

"Well, lately, I've been paying more attention to some of the advice Hermione is always handing out, including the usual about doing my homework. And you know, my grades are improving and I'm doing a little better in class too. I've started to really get to know Neville, and I like him, I think he could be a very good friend. His confidence is slowly improving, and that's changing him in a good way."

Ginny nodded along as he made his points. "I agree. Neville is coming out of his shell. His grades are improving too, if you haven't noticed," Ginny pointed out.

Harry smiled. "I have, it's been something Neville and I have discussed over our occasional game of chess. I like playing him at that game, and I think it's because he doesn't take it so seriously and we're pretty evenly matched. With Ron, it was always just a way to pass the time, I never really liked playing the game."

Ginny chuckled. "No one likes playing Ron at chess, Harry."

"I suppose. Then there's you, Ginny." Harry noticed Ginny shiver slightly, but realized it was probably just the cold wind blowing around the town. "You've been the most surprising friend of all. I wasn't sure

what to expect of you at first, but you've helped me in ways I hadn't imagined. Just talking to you, like this, really helps me." Harry was not sure he wanted to go on, but he found he could not stop himself. "You calm me somehow and make me feel better. Considering all I've been having to deal with, and how -- how starved I am for friendship at times, you can't know how much that means to me, but it means a lot."

Ginny wanted to swoon. After he did not continue for a few moments, she realized she needed to say something. "And all of that is because Ron started acting the git and left you alone?"

"Yeah," he said despondently. "That's what's so sad. I stop hanging around who I thought was my best mate, and then my life actually improves. That's wrong in so many ways that I don't know what to do."

Ginny paused slightly to consider that and could easily see his point, but as a friend, she felt that she had to say something. "Harry, please don't think about it like that. Your best friend, as you think of him, left you, and he took his childish and immature ways with him. That has freed you to grow up and become a better person." She could tell that her words were not particularly comforting, but she hoped he would be able to think about them and maybe understand things a little better. "Harry, I love my brother because he's my brother, but I'll also tell you he can be like a five year-old far too often. When Ron grows up somewhat, he'll be your friend again -- I know you'll take him back. But just like you told Hermione to have lunch with whomever she wants, you have to let Ron do what he wants too. If that means he leaves you for a while, then that's what happens and nothing that happens in the meantime is your fault. You're allowed to enjoy life, you know, so enjoy it."

Harry looked at her, studying her face. "Are you sure you're only thirteen?"

Ginny looked down. "No, I'm far beyond thirteen, mostly from my own stupidity."

"No!" She looked up at his forceful denial. "No," he said more gently. "It wasn't your fault and you weren't stupid. I had to battle him too, and he was strong. You were strong to resist him for so long. We should not have ignored you, so you would not have wanted to spend so much time with that damn diary."

"Thanks again, Harry," she said softly.

"Anytime, Ginny, anytime. You know, it's easy for the rest of us to forget the full impact of that year on you, but you can never forget, can you? You have an understanding of him and his knowledge."

She mutely nodded. It was depressing to think about that year. She was unsure exactly how they even gotten on this subject, but she knew she wanted to change the topic. Then she felt an arm around her shoulders pull her to him briefly before letting go. She looked up at him and saw a small smile.

"You looked like you needed a hug, and as your mum wasn't here, I guess it fell to me."

That warmed her like nothing ever had. "Thank you, Harry. You don't know how much that means to me."

"You're welcome. I guess we're even then, each of us helping the other where we can. How about some lunch? Maybe we can find a small table somewhere," Harry suggested.

She nodded and they started slowly walking over to the Three Broomsticks. On their way there, they ran into Hagrid. After their hellos, the giant bent down to softly speak to them.

"Arry, can ye get to me cabin tonight without being seen?" Harry nodded. "Be there at midnight, then. I got somethin' to show ya, somethin' very important." He stood and walked off without another word. Ginny looked at Harry, who met her gaze, and they both shrugged at the same time, which brought a chuckle from him as she gave in to a light giggle.

Ginny followed Harry into the Three Broomsticks, where they found a small table and had an enjoyable lunch. After they were done eating and talking about the Quidditch teams around the country, Hermione and Neville joined them again as they left the pub, and the foursome had a fun afternoon walking around the village.

Harry rather quickly noticed Hermione was not her usual buoyant self, but it was not until they were walking back to the castle that he decided to find out why. "Hermione? What's wrong? You've been very quiet the whole afternoon."

She looked at him a bit warily. "I'm not sure you want to know," she told him a bit pensively.

"Try me," he told her, before he saw a strange look flash across Neville's face. "What is it?"

Hermione finally just sighed. "It's something we heard at lunch. I'm sorry for doubting you Harry. I asked Ron how he felt about you, since I had been sure he was missing you like you are him, as he had told me that before. But I'm not so sure now, and I'm sad to think that your friendship is in such a state."

Harry put a smile on his face that was only slightly forced. "It's OK, Hermione. Ginny and I talked about friendships over lunch too, and I think I've come to realize that I'm better off without a lot of influence from Ron right now, and maybe that goes for the three of you too. I find that sad, like you do, but Ginny pointed out that we seem to be growing up and he's not."

Neville and Hermione both looked at him, then at Ginny. "That was really insightful, Ginny," Hermione said, before she turned back to Harry. "And if he were to grow up, would you be his friend again?"

They walked on for a few seconds before Harry said, "Yeah, I think so. But I doubt he'd be a best friend again, or at least not for a long time. He seems to like hanging out with Dean and Seamus, so I suspect I'd treat him like them -- casual friends but not someone I'd actively try to spend time with."

"I understand," Hermione told him as they approached the castle. "I understand both the feeling and the sadness of what's been lost, though I won't give up hope for both of you."

Harry was unsure what to say to that, so he kept quiet as they went straight to dinner.

(Sun 20 Nov)

The foursome was sitting at one end of the long Gryffindor table having an early breakfast; no one was near them, which was what Harry wanted. "You won't believe what I saw last night." At the others questioning looks, since they knew he had gone to meet Hagrid, he softly said, "Dragons."

"Dra..." Ginny squeaked before Harry put his hand over her mouth.

"Ssh, yes dragons," he confirmed in a whisper. "Your brother Charlie was there, too. Anyway, that's what the first task is. We have to get something past them it seems."

Ginny paled, while Hermione went silent, and Neville dropped his fork and it clattered onto his plate rather loudly in the sudden silence.

"We need to research dragons and how to subdue them," Hermione finally said.

"Yeah, I'm with you on that," Harry agreed vehemently. "In my talk with Sirius last night, he said there is an easy way, but Ron came downstairs and interrupted the conversation so Sirius didn't get to tell me." Harry knew his tone became venomous at the end, but he was unable to prevent it.

Neville mumbled something, and Ginny said, "Evil git of a brother..."

Harry lightly put a hand on Ginny's shoulder to stop her. While he was unable to make his tone warm, he was successful in removing the bitterness. "I was angry too, but now that I've thought about it, it wasn't really his fault. He had no idea what he was interrupting, and I

would have had to stop the conversation no matter who it was coming into the room. It was just Ron's bad luck that it was him."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "That's very mature of you, Harry."

"I promise you, that was not what I was thinking when it happened."

Ginny's quiet laughter made all of the foursome smile, though Harry was happy she no longer was focusing her ire on Ron. While he had been truly hacked off when Ron came down to the common room, a restless night of thinking about it showed him that it was not really his former friend's fault.

"What else did Sirius say?" Hermione asked.

Harry explained about Sirius telling him that Karkaroff was a former Death Eater. Worse, Harry had been told that Bertha Jorkins knew all about the Tournament and had disappeared, so it was likely Voldemort knew about the tasks in advance -- and that his enemy may be setting a trap. His friends all had thoughtful expressions, but did not say anything specifically. He then turned the redhead sitting beside him.

"Ginny, while I was looking at the dragons, I heard Charlie say that your mother believes all those Daily Prophet articles." He left it at that and hoped she would pick up on his thought; he was not disappointed.

"Oh no," she shook her head. "I'll write her and try to fix that. Maybe I can do that while you three research dragons."

"Sorry, I can't," Neville said. "I haven't finished the essay for Snape."

"No problem, Hermione and I can do this," Harry said. Since they had all finished breakfast, they all went to take care of their tasks.

Harry and Hermione had half a dozen books in front of them on dragons. As they were really getting started in their readings, she pointed out to Harry how Viktor Krum was watching them. Feeling uneasy, Harry suggested she check out the books so they could go

back to their common room to look through them. It was a bit of a relief for Harry, and based on her expression, for Hermione as well, when they were finally on their way back to the tower, books in hand. (A/N: I must credit Sovran as I borrowed one line from his "Meaning of One" story, and then I changed it slightly to fit here and not look like I was trying to plagiarize him. But it was such a great line that it's stuck in my head ever since I read it months ago. Thanks for allowing me to do that Dave.)

Chapter 2: Into Fire

(Thu 24 Nov)

Harry stood in the tent waiting for his turn, which was next. As he waited, he thought back to the last few days, anything to take his mind off of what was about to come next.

While he and Hermione's research on dragons had not turned up anything immediately useful, he had found a way to possibly get past a dragon during the next day. After he had told Cedric about the dragons, Professor Moody all but gave him the idea to fly his broom to handle the first task. That had caused him to madly work on summoning charms until the wee hours of the morning. To his delight, he could now make them work quite well. He owed a lot to Hermione and her patience, particularly since he could now summon objects better than she could.

He heard his name called at last, and left the tent for his testing, his moment of truth, or possibly just his painful death. Trying to shake that thought, he focused on walking into the small arena, where saw the Hungarian Horntail crouched and ready for him. It seemed much bigger than the other night, when he watched it from under his cloak. With a deep breath to try and calm his nerves, he pulled out his wand and shouted, "Accio Firebolt!" He did his best stand still so as not to make the dragon nervous. He also hoped no one had closed the window to his dorm room, which he had left open earlier. Several tense moments later, he felt relief as he heard the whistle of something that approached at high speed. Turning, he caught the summoned Firebolt and mounted his broom, taking off for the sky. He felt normal again because he was flying -- life was good. With a grin, he started on his task -- a task that would be nearly ten grueling minutes long, as Hermione informed him later.

With relief at being done and only an injured shoulder to show for his brush with death, Harry landed his broom with the golden egg in hand. The cheering was enormous, but Madam Pomfrey led him away to heal his shoulder so he was unable to make out any specifics. When he returned to the arena for his scores, his three best friends were waiting for him.

As his scores were announced, Hermione jumped up and down before giving him a hug. "You did it, Harry, and you're tied for first!"

When she released him, Neville stepped forward and slapped him on the back. "Congratulations, Harry! That was impressive."

Before he knew what was happening, Ginny flung herself at Harry and gave him a hug too. "You were amazing and the best out there. Your score is so low only because Karkaroff didn't want to give you what you deserve." Ginny was clearly about to go on when another presence made itself known, so he pulled away from her slightly and turned around to see who it was.

Ron was standing there and glaring, ignoring everyone but his old friend. "Well, Harry, I thought I was going to have to apologize to you, but I think you've just proved my point. If you can get past a dragon, you must have put your name in the Goblet." With an angry look, he added, "And stay away from my sister. You're not good enough for her." With a last glare, he turned around and stomped off.

Harry had to grab Ginny's arm to prevent her from hexing her brother, while Neville and Hermione just gaped after their friend. "Don't worry about him, Ginny," he said into her ear. "Let him make an arse of himself if he wants to. We're your friends and we'll stand by you."

Harry could tell his statement struck almost with the force of a blow as his redheaded friend paled. "Harry, I should be saying that to you, after what he's done to you this year."

He sighed and looked at his other two friends, who were paying very close attention to him. "I won't deny that what he said hurts, but I can tell that all three of you are my true friends, and that means a lot to me." All four of them looked at one another, and collectively they all slowly smiled. It was a silent realization and promise of friendship, no matter what.

"Hey," Neville exclaimed. "I heard there was to be a party in the Common Room. Let's go check it out."

"OK," Harry said. "After that, I need to write Snuffles and tell him what happened. I know he'll be happy."

"I think I'm going to write Mum about this," Ginny said quietly. "She needs to know what a git my brother is being." Then her face turned happier. "She also needs to know just how brilliant you were too, Harry. Your flying was awesome, and Krum should be worried that you could beat him at Quidditch."

They all laughed together at the thought the great Viktor Krum being worried, slowly making their way back to the castle.

The party was great, except for when Harry nearly broke everyone's ear drums when he opened the egg. The screeching was horrendous and so loud that everyone screaming to close it may as well have said nothing at all. Probably the best part of the party was that at least one of his true friends was always near by. Harry wondered if it was real or just his imagination, but Ginny seemed to be nearby most often, and he kind of liked that for some reason.

(Thu 8 Dec)

Almost three weeks before Christmas, Professor McGonagall stopped teaching her fourth year Transfiguration class a few minutes early. "Class, I have an announcement. Another Triwizard Tournament tradition will continue, and we will have a Yule Ball on Christmas Day evening." Almost without exception, the boys groaned with dread while the girls sighed with satisfaction. "It will begin at eight in the evening and go until midnight. All of you may attend, since it is for fourth years and above, though someone from a lower year may attend if you invite him or her as your date. While you do not have to have a date to attend, you will find it more enjoyable if you do."

The bell rang ending class. "Mr. Potter? Please stay for moment. Everyone else is dismissed."

Harry told his two friends to go on and he would catch up. "Yes Professor?"

"Mr. Potter, be sure you have a partner."

"A partner? I don't understand."

"A dance partner, Mr. Potter. It is tradition for the champions to start the ball by dancing first. Be sure to be there with your partner, for you shall not disgrace Hogwarts or Gryffindor House. Now, head on to your next class."

Stunned, Harry stammered out a, "Y-Yes P-Professor," and left for Potions.

He was still in such a state of shock, he completely messed up his potion for the day and received a detention that evening. He was not pleased.

After potions, he started to think about the Ball and who he might ask to go with him. That was suddenly a very important question, he realized, as he became aware of receiving an unusual number of glances from girls. Even he, who knew little about girls, knew what was on their mind after McGonagall's explanation. The glances, giggling, and whispers around him were a dead give away.

That caused him to remember something Hermione had said last time they were in the library a few days ago. She had again pointed out that Krum was there and seemed to be looking at them, before all the fan girls found Krum and started crowding around the famous Quidditch player. "Look at them," Hermione had said. "They only like him because he's famous!"

Right now, Harry felt the same way, though he had dealt with other forms of popularity over his life, mainly from his scar. What he really wanted was a partner who would treat him like "plain Harry", not "the famous Harry Potter", but he had few people he considered friends that would do that, let alone someone new.

In the Great Hall, he took the open seat between Neville and Dean, with Hermione across from them. Dean started talking about the Ball, and they all speculated about what might happen, since it was only natural to be curious.

"What did Professor McGonagall want after class, Harry?" Hermione asked after the conversation died down.

"Oh, she said I had to have a partner. The champions start the dancing at the Ball," he said nervously. Hermione looked interested at that bit of news, which immediately got him thinking again about who he might take.

Turning to his left to discuss possible dates with Neville, he saw Ginny come in with three of her friends. That made him remember something else he had noticed today. "Neville?" he asked in a soft voice so Hermione would not hear as she looked over some class notes. "Have you noticed that girls tend to travel together in packs? How are we supposed to ask them out if we can't get them alone?"

"Don't know, Harry. But I agree, it's going to be hard. Maybe I'll just go stag, then I won't have to worry about it." Neville shrugged and stabbed at his chicken.

Harry gave that idea some thought, but he knew from McGonagall it really was not an option he could choose. With a sigh, he continued the quiet conversation. "Neville? I've got an idea, and I want to know what you think about it. We're a small group who are close friends and there's four of us. It just so happens there's two of them and two of us. What do you think about keeping us all together? If you asked Hermione or Ginny, I'll ask the other."

Neville choked slightly and Harry had to pound him on the back. Harry saw Hermione looking at him with a strange expression, so he turned back to his plate. When she looked away to Parvati, who had spoken to her, he turned left again. "What do you say, Neville? Which one would you like to ask?"

Harry's friend buttered the last half of his roll while he thought. With a glance across the table to make sure Hermione was still talking to Parvati and that he would not be heard, Neville whispered, "I'd rather ask Hermione. Besides, I think Ginny likes you."

"Really?" Harry asked. "Well, I know she used to. You think she still does?"

"Yeah, yeah I do."

"Hmm, OK, it's settled then. You should ask her soon, Neville, before someone else does. I'll be asking Ginny as soon as I can find her alone." Harry looked back down the table and Ginny was gone. With a sigh of frustration, Harry realized that he had detention in ten minutes and it was unlikely he would find Ginny that night.

It was after eleven before Harry return to Gryffindor Tower that evening, and the Common Room was empty of all but a few seventh years. Swearing under his breath, he went upstairs to go to sleep. The last thought on his mind that night was how stupid the whole Ball was.

(Fri 9 Dec)

The next morning, Harry was up an hour early, thanks to his nerves. While he was a bit tired, he supposed he should be thankful, as he was determined to get this over with so he could try to be normal. After all, if he could face a huge Hungarian Horntail, surely he could face a petite redhead girl.

Still mentally cursing the Ball and that he was required to do this at all, he waited in the Common Room watching the stairs to the girl's dorm rooms. About half of the house had gone to breakfast when he saw her coming down, though with a friend in tow. As it was only one other girl, Harry felt a little emboldened and decided to push ahead anyway. Since she was a third year, he doubted many others would ask her, but he knew he had to do this soon just in case he was wrong about the other fourth year boys -- particularly when he considered how pretty Ginny was.

Getting up, he walked over and met them as they neared the Portrait hole. "Hey Ginny? Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Mandy looked at her friend and giggled with a big smile. "I'll see you at breakfast -- maybe." She giggled again and left by herself.

Harry looked at a slightly blushing Ginny and asked, "W-will you come over here where we can talk privately?" He was unsure how he

was going to survive this, but he was determined to ask her no matter what it took.

Guiding her to a corner of the room where no one could walk up to them accidentally, he leaned against the wall with one arm, partially boxing her in. "Ginny, I, uh, I had this idea..."

Ginny was not quite sure what was happening, though she started to hope that Mandy was right, and Harry was going to ask her to the Ball. There was also something indefinable about her position in the corner, with Harry leaning there and closing her in that thrilled her. It felt as if he wanted her, that he might be seeing her as more than a close friend. She did her best to suppress her hope and wait patiently while he obviously tried to get his thoughts together.

"Well, I, uh, I want you to know that, uh, that is, I would be honored if, uh, ..."

"Hey! What are you doing to my sister?!"

Ginny saw a look of intensity come across Harry's face that simultaneously enchanted and scared her. She watched him abruptly spin around and face her prat of a brother, wand in hand by his side. She wondered how he had done that as she had not seen him draw it, and she knew that there was no wand in his hand before the interruption.

"Ron, bugger off, this is a private conversation," Harry told him in a quiet but intense voice. Ginny was amazed to realize that just like getting the egg, Harry was going to do this and no one was going to stop him. He had an intensity about him.

"Get away from her you git! I will not let you take advantage of her!"

As Ron started to advance, it became apparent that Harry was not going to take this. Ginny was unsure why, exactly, he was on such a short fuse, but Ron had been an arse far too long this year. Harry's wand whipped up and went through the motions as she heard him mutter, "Petrificus Totalus." Ron's limbs locked up and he fell over, but Ginny had no real pity for him despite the loud sound he made

when he fell backwards and hit the ground. At the same time, she was amused that Harry never noticed the small audience that had collected before he turned back around to face her.

As she watched him put his wand back up and run the fingers of his left hand through his hair, her heart beat a little faster. "Now, where was I?" She had no idea how he could be so flustered trying to talk to her, but she could see his determination to get through this even if it killed him.

Ginny almost had not caught the question as she had been far too engaged watching him muss his hair before she finally looked back into his emerald green eyes. Her blush was back, she knew, but she hoped it was fairly minor. "You were saying you'd be honored about something..." she offered helpfully.

"Right, right. OK, I can do this," he muttered to himself and leaned back against the wall with one arm. Taking a deep breath, he started again. "Ginny, I want you know that, uh, I would be honored, very honored, if you would, uh, c..."

"Ginny!"

"Is he giving you a hard time?"

"Because we can take care of him for you."

Their tones sounded almost as protective as Ron's had. "Damn it!" Harry swore and twirled again.

Ginny saw Harry's wand in his hand, again not sure how he had gotten it there so quickly. This time, he did not try to talk to the interrupters, except for speaking with his wand. She heard, "Stupefy! Stupefy!" His training with the group was paying off, as she watched her twin brothers fall to the floor. She had started to draw her wand as it seemed a bit unfair with two on one, but Harry had not needed her help, so she slid her wand back into her robes.

Ginny and Harry both saw Lee Jordan looking at Harry and then at the twins lying on the floor at his feet. "Do you want to interrupt us,

"too?" Harry asked the Quidditch announcer with some heat to his voice.

Seeing three Weasleys on the floor, Lee paled slightly despite his darker complexion, and took a hasty step back, hands raised. "Uh, no, Harry, no, not at all; I'm just fine. I was just going to breakfast, and uh, I think I'll be going." Ginny watched Lee beat a hasty retreat out the Portrait hole.

Ginny turned back to Harry just in time to see him take another deep breath, before he turned back around to look at her. Ginny could tell he never heard the faint giggles that drifted from across the room. Ginny did her best to stand still, putting a smile on her face, as she tried to will him the strength to finish this time.

Harry was entranced, for her face was so angelic that he was suddenly very happy that Neville had wanted to ask Hermione. He definitely preferred Ginny's long mane of hair, and her playful smile.

"Right, then, one more time. Ginny, I would be honored if you would come with me to the Yule Ball." He could not believe he had gotten that out in a single breath, but he had finally asked the question. He saw her smile grow even bigger than she was, and it was as though her whole face lit up with happiness.

"Harry, I'd love to go to the Ball with you!"

"You would?"

"Yes! Why wouldn't I? You're not only one of my best friends, but you were amazing for taking on my brothers like that."

"It wasn't that big a deal. Why wouldn't I do that for a girlfriend?"

As her eyes seemed to go as wide as possible and he heard her gasp, he realized what he had said. Only his surprise at his own stupidity kept his face the same. How was he going to tell her that he would stand up for any one of his friends, and she was just a friend who was a girl? While he tried to quickly think of a graceful way out of his mistake, she launched herself at him, throwing her arms around

his neck, and he felt her lips on his. Her flowery scent assaulted him almost as much as her lips were. Not really knowing what to do, he put his hands on her waist and did his best to mimic her. He also became aware of her body pressed against his.

When the kiss finally ended, he continued to hold her close, somewhat surprised to find his arms now wrapped firmly around her. All he could think of was that this whole kissing business was bloody brilliant. He was stupid for thinking he needed to get out of this. Lowering his head down, he kissed her again. It was a simpler kiss, but still contained passion.

Breaking apart, Harry was slightly embarrassed that they both easily heard his stomach rumble, but Ginny just chuckled. "How about we go get some breakfast, boyfriend?"

He gave her a goofy grin before he told her, "OK, whatever you want." Knowing it was what the older boys did, he grabbed her hand and started to lead her out the Tower, wondering absently how long he would have this smile stuck on his face.

Ginny looked over and saw that their first two observers were still there, though a few more had joined them. As she and Harry stepped over Fred and George, she looked at her new boyfriend and said, "Wait for me out on the landing for just a minute, would you? I need to do something."

Glancing down, he said, "They won't bother you for a little while yet."

"It's a girl thing, Harry. For one quick minute, please?"

He gave her another goofy grin which she found herself returning, before he squeezed her hand and walked out past the portrait.

Ginny walked over to the stairs to the girl's dorm rooms. Three of the five girls left with smiles on their faces. Ginny looked at the two remaining ones, both of whom looked like they had been smacked with a happy stick if she had to judge from the dreamy look on their faces.

"Can I come talk to you later? I need some advice, and I don't have a big sister to help me."

Angelina and Alicia glanced at each other before they met Ginny's gaze. "What with?" the girl with the dreadlocks asked.

"Well, now that I have a boyfriend, I just realized that there are lots of things I don't know, things my mother would never tell me. I need to know how to do some things, like all the ways to kiss."

Both of the other girls let out a most unladylike squeal. "We'd love to," Alicia told her. "I've only got an older brother, and I've always wanted a little sister."

"Me, too," Angelina agreed. "I'm an only child, and I'd enjoy being a big sister. Come up to our dorm room after you kiss Harry good-night. We'll have a long talk then." The two Chasers laughed softly and each gave Ginny a quick hug.

"You'd better go," Angelina told her. "Harry is waiting and I think Fred just twitched. We'll delay them for you."

Ginny gave both a thankful good-bye and found Harry waiting for her just outside the portrait. Grabbing his hand and sharing a mutual smile, they walked to breakfast. The fact that they were holding hands did not go unnoticed by people when they entered the Great Hall; she could hear a few of the whispers as they went to take their seats. There were two empty places across from Neville and Hermione, as though everyone at the table tacitly knew the foursome always sat together.

"So?" Hermione asked with a pointed look at their entwined fingers.

Ginny just smiled and nodded.

"I'm happy for you, Ginny."

"What?" Neville asked, as he looked up from his breakfast.

"Harry asked her to go to the Ball," Hermione announced.

"He did, but that's not all, He also asked me to be his girlfriend."

Hermione let out a sound that almost sounded like a squeal. "Ginny, I'm so happy for you! You must be thrilled."

Ginny nodded vigorously, and she knew her face was going to hurt by tonight from smiling far too much. In some ways, one of her dearest dreams finally came true, and she was the girlfriend of Harry Potter. With a shake to get her thoughts under control, she gave Hermione and Neville the quick version of what happened that morning.

Hermione turned and glared at her friend. "Harry? Did you really have to do that? You know that's going to make it harder to reconcile with Ron."

Ginny saw Harry wave off Hermione's concern with his other hand. "I was on a task and I wasn't going to let him interrupt me. Besides, Ginny didn't seem to mind," Harry told them with another goofy grin appearing on his face. Ginny wondered in passing if Harry's face might hurt by this evening as well.

"Boys," Hermione muttered as she returned to her breakfast. Ginny did not share her friend's sentiment at the moment, and she continued to wear a smug smile. Glancing around, she saw her friend Mandy sitting further down the table, waving and smiling at her.

Neville was surprised at his friend. He knew Harry was going to ask Ginny to the Ball, but the decision to ask her to be his girlfriend was unexpected. Then again, he realized, Harry had gone quiet after they discussed whether Ginny still liked him -- maybe Harry had been interested in her, and just took the opportunity. When Hermione and Ginny were both paying attention to other things, he shot Harry a questioning look, hoping for some kind of hint as to what happened. Harry just shrugged and smiled, which failed to help Neville much. As he wondered about what Harry had been thinking, he found himself facing Harry who was giving him a very pointed look -- and then Harry nodded toward Hermione.

Neville opened his mouth to say something, but Harry just nodded and tilted his head again. Neville saw Ginny turn back to them, her smile still fully in place, when she started helping herself to some breakfast. Neville was amused that Ginny was ladling food onto Harry's plate as well, until Harry gave him the pointed look with another nod toward Hermione. Taking a deep breath, Neville screwed up his courage as far as he thought he could make it go.

"H-H-Hermione?" Neville tried not to think about how hard his heart was beating against his ribs.

"Yes, Neville?"

"W-W-Will you go with me?" He had said it, and it was a relief to have it over with. He hoped she would say yes, but a nagging voice in the back of his mind told him she might not.

"Huh?"

Neville felt his courage begin to melt. He was uncertain if she was confused, surprised, or upset. He reached down and firmly gripped the bench seat with both hands, and he knew his knuckles had to be white with the pressure. "T-To the B-Ball. W-Will you g-go with m-me?"

Hermione's face brightened immediately. "Neville, I'd like to go with you to the Ball. Thank you."

Neville's newly gained confidence over the last six weeks soared to new heights after falling near his toes moments ago. "Great! Thanks!"

"I'm sure we'll have a wonderful time," she told him with a smile. It was all he could do not to have the same odd smile on his face that Harry did, but he sat and basked in her answer as she and Ginny started talking about the Ball.

As the foursome finished breakfast and were about to leave, Fred and George came up to them. "Harry, old man, stay calm. We come in peace," Fred announced.

"Yeah, there's no need to be hasty here," the other twin said, both hands in plain sight.

"We just have one simple question, and it's for you, Gin-Gin."

"Are you happy about this? You're not being forced are you?"

"That's two questions," Ginny pointed out, and Neville was amused that her smile never faltered.

"I suppose it is..."

"But there are two of us, so that's one each."

Neville was used to the strange Weasley dynamic, but it was odd to see both Fred and George looking serious while Ginny appeared to be perfectly carefree. Neville watched her turn away from the twins and turn her smile on Harry. "Very and no. Satisfied?"

"Right. Sorry about that misunderstanding in the Common Room, Harry..."

"But from where we were standing, it looked like you were holding her there against her will."

"We hadn't really planned to do anything initially, despite our git of a brother on the floor."

"We were merely concerned in a normal brotherly way."

She turned sharply back toward her brothers, and narrowed her expression in suspicion. "How come you're being so nice about this?"

"Ah well, you know Gin-Gin, you are our favorite sister."

"Exactly, we just wanted to make sure you were happy."

"Uh-huh. I don't suppose Angelina and Alicia standing over there watching you talk to your only sister have any bearing on this at all,

do they?" Ginny continued her interrogation. Neville was amused to see the twins look uncomfortable for a change.

"Well, maybe, after they explained everything that had happened this morning, starting with Ron."

"And there was their promise to go to the Ball with us if we were nice to you," the second twin said with a grin.

"Speaking of Ron, where is he?" Harry asked, obviously wary of his dorm mate.

"Yeah, about that. He heard you ask Ginny to the Ball, and then to be your girlfriend. We convinced him that he needs to leave you two alone and took him to the kitchens for breakfast."

"You should be fine from him, though expect him to continue the silent treatment."

Harry paused to think about the hidden implications in what the twins were admitting to. Realizing that this was not changing anything from the status quo, he just sighed. "I can live with that," he offered calmly. "And thanks, guys, I appreciate your help."

"Hey, no problem, Harry," he got in stereo along with matching grins.

"It really was just a misunderstanding," one of the twins reiterated.

"Come on everyone," Hermione called as she stood, "it's time to go to class."

Everyone else started rising too. In the entryway to the Great Hall, Harry gave Ginny a quick kiss on the cheek as they parted for their classes.

All in all, Harry thought his day went quite well. He had some problems paying attention in class because random thoughts about a pretty redhead kept intruding, but every spell he tried that day worked on the first try. Even Hermione was quietly amazed at his sudden and unexpected success. Several times during classes, when Hermione

was not asking him questions on something he had managed to do, Harry noticed Ron giving him glares; but he was so used to Ron's behavior that Harry easily ignored him.

With class finally over, Harry walked with Neville and Hermione back to the Tower for their free period before dinner. Harry and Neville played a game of chess, while Hermione announced she was headed to the library to gather materials for an essay she was working on. Harry was happy when Ginny found them in the Tower when her last class was over, and together they walked down to the library to pick Hermione up on their way to eat.

"You'll never guess what just happened," Hermione said conspiratorially to her friends while they all served themselves dinner. When she was asked about it, she said, "I was in the library working on my Transfiguration homework, and Viktor Krum came over."

"Oh? Has he taken his watching you to a new level?" Harry asked with a concerned voice.

Hermione laughed. "No, he asked me to go to the Ball with him. Can you believe it?"

Neville looked mortified and went pale as he looked down at his plate. Harry was about to say something, but he noticed Hermione caught Neville's expression and with a gentle voice told him, "Neville, I told him no, that I already had a very nice date that I wanted to go to the Ball with."

Neville looked up with hope etched on his face. "Really?"

"Of course, Neville. I wouldn't do anything like that to you. I'm glad you asked me first," she told him. Neville beamed. Harry looked at Ginny and they smiled at one another. "It would be interesting to talk with him about another Wizarding School, but there's something about him that makes me uncomfortable."

When they finished dinner, Ginny turned to Harry. "I need to go mail a letter to Mum. Want to come with me?"

"Sure." He looked to his other two friends. "We'll catch up with you later in the Tower." Neville and Hermione agreed and let the new couple go.

"So, is it a letter about what's happening?" he asked as they slowly made their way to the owlery.

"Mostly. I told her about us and needing some dress robes for the Ball. She didn't send any with me since I'm only a third year, but she'll probably mail some in a few days. I also told her about how Ron acted this morning. She needs to know what he's been doing to all of us, since no one else will tell her."

"Will she believe you?" he wondered.

"I think so. We've always gotten along pretty well, and I've told her several times that he's not being a nice brother this term. I'm sort of hoping that the repetition is making the point sink in. I guess we'll find out when we next see her, though I'm not sure when that will be with the Yule Ball. It might not be until the end of the year."

That gave Harry a new thought that he was not sure how to handle. Knowing it was a bridge he was going to have to cross, he started trying to figure out what he was going to do.

Ginny must have recognized his sudden pensive mood as she simply asked, "What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking about the summer. Normally I come to see your family, but with Ron and I not getting along, I'm afraid that won't happen."

"Nonsense," she told him. "You're a friend of the family. Mum will always let you come over."

"But I always sleep with Ron..."

"We have other rooms, Harry. Mum has always had you sleep with my brother because she thought you'd be more comfortable that way -- you know, having a friend around. You could stay in Bill's old room

just as easily, so don't worry about it for now. Ron may grow up by then, and it won't be a problem anymore."

"All right." He put the problem out of his mind when they arrived at the owlery. Harry called Hedwig down for Ginny to use and held his pet while his new girlfriend tied her letter to the owl's leg. With a last friendly stroke of the feathers on the back of her head, he sent Hedwig off to The Burrow with Ginny's letter.

That done, Harry turned to Ginny and looked into her eyes. She gazed back at him expectantly, her eyes flicking down to his lips momentarily. Taking the hint, Harry leaned down and gave her a kiss. With a satisfied sigh, she grabbed his hand and they started walking back to the Tower, talking about what they thought the Ball would be like. As she began to speculate over the music choice, however, Harry was reminded of yet another problem in his life.

"Uh, Ginny? We may have a problem."

"What? Did you leave your dress robes at home?" she asked with a soft laugh.

"No," he said and rolled his eyes at her, which provoked another laugh. "This is a Ball, and we have to dance. In fact, we have to open the dance."

"OK, and that's a problem because why?"

He groaned. "I don't know how to dance, that's why."

"Oh, no problem, really. I can teach you before then. It's not hard."

"You can?" He was amazed, but then he had never really had 'learning to dance' on his list of things to achieve. He had never considered how hard it might be, it was just something he had no knowledge of.

"Sure, we'll work on it tomorrow." As they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, Ginny said, "Gobstones" and the door opened.

Inside, they found their other two friends and spent the evening in fun conversation. When Ginny mentioned she was going to give Harry dancing lessons tomorrow, Neville blushed deeply and looked nervously at Hermione. Harry was amused that her intelligence did not fail her, although even he could tell what that look was about.

Hermione smiled at Neville, though, and asked, "Do you need a few lessons too, Neville?" He shyly nodded. "All right, we can all have lessons tomorrow. After dancing lessons, we can have more training lessons for Harry," she suggested, and Harry was happy everyone agreed easily.

As it neared curfew, they decided to call it a night, even though they were already in the tower. Hermione and Neville went on up with a wave, while Harry walked Ginny over to the girl's stairs. "Good-night, Ginny." He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a nice kiss. She eagerly returned his passion.

They heard a growl behind them. Looking around, they saw Ron at the bottom of the boy's stairs glaring at them. He looked like he wanted to come over to them, until he glanced at Ginny, which caused a slightly fearful look to come over his face. After a few seconds, he ran up to the fourth year room.

"Be careful, Harry," Ginny warned him. "I don't think he'll attack you when you're sleeping, as that would be too low for even him, but he seems really worked up over this."

"Don't worry, Ginny, I'll be safe. See you in the morning." He let her go and went up the stairs, keeping his eyes firmly in front of him in case Ron was loitering to talk to him.

Ginny watched Harry go until he reached the first landing, then she went up her stairs. Instead of going to her room, however, she went to the dorm for the sixth years. Angelina and Alicia were sitting on one bed talking quietly, and the other three beds were empty.

"Ginny! Come here," Alicia said and patted the bed beside her.

With only a little trepidation, Ginny went over to her two new "adopted" big sisters. "Before you get started, thanks for this morning; you know, helping to straighten out Fred and George," Ginny said quietly.

Angelina smiled. "No problem, I enjoyed it actually." Her sixth year friend agreed. "We saw the whole thing and it was so cute. Harry was obviously nervous, but so determined to ask you, no matter how hard it was or what he had to do."

"And standing up for you against all three of your brothers," Alicia added and then sighed. "That's a boy who cares. If you ever decide you don't want him any more, be sure you let me know, Ginny," she told the younger girl with a wink.

Somehow, that made Ginny feel closer to the girl, not in a competition.

"So, what do you want to know about, now that you're coming into womanhood?" Angelina asked.

"Well, I'd like to know more about kissing," Ginny said, already knowing her cheeks were glowing, "especially the techniques and what boys like. I know I'm not ready for a-anything beyond that ... but I'd also like to know, right?" This was one of those times when being of fair complexion was something Ginny hated. "I guess I want to know what comes next so that I can, ah, handle it well when I'm ready. That's the kind of thing mum would never tell me," Ginny told them, sure she was glowing like a fire.

Alicia grinned. "We can help you there."

Angelina addressed Ginny in a more authoritative tone. "Now, when it comes to kissing, there are several different types of kisses, and ways you can do them..."

Ginny started taking mental notes with visions of trying them all on Harry over the course of the rest of the year.

Harry drew his wand and put it behind his back as he came to the door of his dorm room. He truly did not believe that Ron would try anything, yet their friendship had deteriorated so much that he was

not entirely comfortable thinking he actually knew what Ron was thinking anymore.

Deciding he needed to be able to retreat should it become too much for some unknown reason, he left the door open as he walked in. He could already hear Ron bad-mouthing him to Dean, Seamus, and Neville, who were all leaning against their own beds. Neville was clearly furious with Ron, and the other two boys did not look overly happy with the redhead either. As Harry reached his bed, Ron turned and locked gazes with him.

"I told you to stay away from my sister, you piece of slime. You're corrupting her and I'm not going to allow that," Ron told him with venom.

"Ron, calm down..."

"I will not calm down, you git," he shouted. "I can't believe you kissed her. Did you use an Imperious curse on her? I bet you did, you..."

Harry realized abruptly Ron had lost all sense of reason on this subject, and perhaps on anything at all to do with Harry directly. As Ron accused Harry of supposed wrong-doing, Ron advanced toward Harry, and he realized he could see Ron's fist was balled and drawing back.

"...pervert!" Ron swung at the final insult. Harry deftly stepped aside at the last second and let Ron's fist go by him. The redhead over balanced and his shoulder hit one of the posts of Harry's bed, spinning him and causing him to be more out of balance.

Ron howled at the impact on the wooden post before he fell to the side tripping over Harry's trunk, skinning his right shin as he toppled to the floor.

Harry could tell Ron was going to get up and come at him again from the muttered curses, so he waved his wand and cast, "Petrificus," while he pointed his wand at Ron's legs. Ron's legs went stiff and that caused more vocal cursing.

"You bastard! You hit me when I can't even defend myself. Come on, you wanker, fight me fair and square! Or is that too much to ask of a Slytherin like you!"

Harry knew immediately that he was not going to be able to settle this calmly and rationally, but there was no good solution to get Ron to shut up. After a moment, Harry turned to his three other dorm mates while Ron continued to curse. "Will you lot make sure he doesn't leave? I'll be back in a minute."

"Sure, Harry, no problem," Neville told him. Looking at the other two, they nodded their agreement, though Harry suspected they did not want to get involved personally.

Harry smartly stepped around Ron on the floor, though his former friend tried to grab his ankles. Briskly, Harry went up the stairs outside their room, and knowing he had three choices, he decided to simply go to the top.

As he walked into the room of the seventh years, one of them looked up at him. "What do you want, Potter?"

Harry looked over to another seventh year. "Alan, can you come down to our dorm room? There's a fight that won't seem to stop." Harry then told him what Ron had said to him and how Ron had tried to hit him.

The seventh year boy prefect had been lying on his bed in just his pyjama bottoms. Upon hearing Harry's side of things, he grabbed his wand and a T-shirt and motioned Harry back out the door. Harry saw that the prefect's T-shirt was on by the time they reached the stairs.

Inside his dorm room, Harry noticed that Ron had managed to drag himself over to his bed and was trying to reach his wand. Neville had his own wand out, and was shifting back and forth uncertainly, while Dean and Seamus had moved onto their own beds and had guarded looks on their faces. Harry doubted Ron could get his wand down, but decided to play it safe regardless. "Accio wand!" The stick flew over to him.

"Damn it, Potter!" Ron bellowed and the hand groping for the wand lowered back down to the floor. "I swear I'm going to kill you myself! I don't care if you can beat a dragon! I'm going to turn you into dragon food! You are going to pay with your blood for ever touching my sister! And your life is over for kissing her! Even if I have to learn the Unforgivables, I'm going to take care of you!"

The prefect stood there slack-jawed as Harry waved vaguely at the problem he had mentioned on the floor. Harry was sad that they all had to listen to the vitriolic statements coming out of his former best friend, who was lying on the floor and obviously could not see the prefect standing in the doorway. "Enough!" Alan's voice echoed in the room, and the rage was almost palpable.

Ron instantly shut up at the sound of the new voice and managed to roll over a few times so he was not behind the bed and could see the doorway. He paled when he saw the prefect standing there.

"I see your point, Harry. I don't think you can solve this, nor can I really. May I have his wand please?" Harry handed it over, and he could tell the prefect was striving to suppress his own anger at the situation. "Now, Mr. Weasely, if I take that spell off, will you walk with me nicely? Or shall I just stun you and levitate you to another room?"

It took a moment, but Ron finally answered, "I'll go on my own."

The prefect removed the partial petrification and Ron stood jerkily, clearly flexing his legs for a moment to get the blood flowing normally. Harry stepped back two steps to give Ron a clear path through the doorway, though he remained ready with his wand out and hanging by his thigh. Ron calmly walked over to the doorway, but as he neared Harry, he took a big step sideways and tried to punch Harry again. Harry had anticipated some antic, and quickly stepped sideways as he pushed Ron the other way and cast, "Stupefy!" Ron went down like a sack of potatoes.

"Nice reaction time, Harry," Alan told him into the disturbing silence. "What a git. Mobilicorpus." He then left the room with Ron floating ahead of him.

Harry looked out the doorway and saw heads coming out of every boy's dorm room, and just knew that the commotion and yelling would have been relayed, if not heard outright, up the girl's stairs as well. It was almost inevitable that Ginny would hear about it, and he knew that she would expect him to explain it to her immediately. With a resigned sigh for how a good evening suddenly went so bad, he walked down the steps to wait for her in the Common Room.

He had barely made it into the Common Room before Ginny rushed up to him and gave him a tight hug as she watched the prefect levitate her unconscious brother out of the portrait hole. "We heard all the shouting, but what happened? Are you hurt?"

He led her over to a couch and sat down, but she surprised him when she sat on his lap and put her arms around his neck. It felt incredibly comforting, especially considering the emotional battle he had just been through. Slowly, he began to tell her, speaking softly into her hair, using her smell and the feel of her cuddling against him to calm himself and let the tension he had hardly been aware of simply drain away.

Minerva McGonagall was trying to finish grading all the essays for her classes on Monday. Tomorrow was Saturday, but she did not want to be grading all day, as there was a new issue of Transfiguration Magic that had just arrived. There was a knock on her door interrupting her as she corrected an overly imaginative first year's belief that being an animagus was easy. Surprised to hear a knock on her door, she glanced at the clock on the wall, quickly noting that it was half past ten. Her surprise grew yet again when she answered the door to see her seventh year boy's prefect standing there in his pyjamas and levitating an unconscious Ronald Weasley. "Mr. McWilliams?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Professor, but I'm afraid there is a problem that won't wait. May we come in?"

Curious as to what could cause this, she stepped back to allow passage and closed the door after them. The prefect set the boy on the floor and woke him with an "Enervate." Ron immediately started to get up quickly, but the prefect was ready for him this time. "No! Be still, Weasley!"

Ron looked up and saw the prefect with his wand pointed at him, then he saw his head-of-house standing beside the prefect. All of the fight went out of him in a flash.

"Would you please explain what's going on, Mr. McWilliams?" Minerva was almost sure she was not going to like what she was about to hear. She had heard a few things about this particular Weasley during the year, stories that did not cast him in a good light. But she had tried to stay out of it, knowing that most student squabbles solved themselves with a little time, and the constant fallings-out, and back in again, were far too tiresome to keep up with.

Alan McWilliams started explaining what Harry had told him, what he had seen happen, and then everything he had personally heard Ron say. McGonagall glared as the story unfolded, and while her prefect became nervous and pale as her gaze sharpened, it was nothing compared to how the Weasley boy changed color. As McWilliams wound down the story, he handed Weasley's wand over to her with a shrug. "I thought you might want to handle this one, Professor," he told her quietly.

After the story, she sat there silently contemplating what to do. "Mr. Weasley, you will be spending the night on that couch over there. Your punishment will be determined in the morning." Turning away from the youngest Weasley boy, she said, "Mr. McWilliams, thank you for doing your job and bringing him to me. Please tell Mr. Potter that he won't have to worry about his sleep being interrupted by a fight tonight."

McWilliams nodded at the implied dismissal and left after bidding his head-of-house good-night. As he left, Alan pitied the Weasley boy, but he realized it was also Weasley's own fault.

Back in the Tower, he found Potter and the Weasley girl still cuddled on the couch. He gently touched their shoulders and both looked up at him. "I'm afraid you'll have to go back to bed now, but don't worry about Ron. He's spending the night in Professor McGonagall's quarters." Alan watched the two give each other a quick kiss before separating, but he remained to see that they both went their separate ways, and finally he followed Harry up the stairs.

Going back into the fourth year dorm room, he asked the other three, "Does anyone else have a problem with Harry?" He knew Longbottom did not, so he mainly looked at the other two.

"No, no problem at all. That was all Ron, not us," Seamus said. Dean nodded his agreement, as did Neville.

"Ron's not coming back tonight and McGonagall will deal with it tomorrow, so you all get a good night's rest. Sleep late if you want, since it's a Saturday. Good-night." Shaking his head at it all, Alan McWilliams went back up to his room.

He knew he would be telling this story several times before he finally got to sleep. He glanced in the room with the Weasley twins, but they were not about, which was surprising. Their friend Lee gave him a shrug, but the mystery was resolved when he arrived in his room and saw the twins sitting on his bed waiting for him. While he was not particularly surprised to find them there, he was surprised at their reaction to the story. They made it abundantly clear that they thought Ron was a git, and that their brother had screwed up royally.

(A/N: Please note that I've made Harry avoid the whole issue of "But Ginny is Ron's little sister, I can't do that", that many authors like to torture him with. Instead, I've had him stand up to Ron and to a small extent Fred and George too (though their initial objection was an honest misunderstanding as they do like Harry). Perhaps it's a British thing not to date your best friend's little sister (and as an American I therefore don't understand), but I don't see what the big deal is there. My guess is that it's merely a plot device on JKR's part. Sure Harry doesn't want to lose Ron as a friend (normally, but not in this story), but the basic issue does not seem very realistic to me. Therefore, I wanted to be over-the-top obvious that this issue isn't real in this story.)

Sorry for the mini-cliffie, but you'll have to wait until next time to find out what happens to Ron. I hope to update in about a week. -- kb)

Chapter 3: Into Hot Water

(Sat 10 Dec)

Ron slowly woke up to a faint murmuring in the background. He also found that he had crick in his neck. Opening his eyes revealed that he was not in his normal bed, and that was when last night came flooding back to him. He groaned loudly as he realized just how much trouble he was in right now.

"Good morning, Mr. Weasley. Do you need to use the lavatory before we discuss your punishment for your actions last night?"

He looked over and saw his head-of-house in her usual stern, prim, and proper appearance. He wanted to go hide somewhere, but that did not seem to be an option. Deciding he did have that urge, he sat up and answered her. "Yes, Professor." She pointed him to a doorway.

When he returned from the bathroom, his stomach growled. "Are we going to get breakfast first?" he asked hopefully.

"That is not up to me," she replied cryptically. "If you'll come to my Floo, we shall take a short trip."

Ron walked over to join her, confused, until she grabbed some Floo Powder and threw it into her fireplace. As she said, "The Burrow," his dread increased a hundredfold. He was barely aware of her giving him a slight push to send him on his way.

Coming out in a tumble of arms and legs, he landed on his bum in his parents' house. Looking up, he saw his mother with an upset look on her face and a concerned-looking father. His father reached down and hauled him to his feet just before his head-of-house came out of the fireplace.

His mum looked at the Professor, her face visibly losing a little of its anger, and asked in a controlled polite tone, "Would you like some tea, Minerva?"

"Yes, please. I may need it for the length of the conversation we're about to have." Ron watched McGonagall take the immediately proffered saucer with a tea cup and sit on the indicated couch. He wished he had his own cup of tea, toast, and bacon as his hunger made itself more vocal.

The elder Weasleys each took a cup and sat together another couch, primarily facing McGonagall but keeping Ron well in sight. As he was about to sit in a chair by the fireplace, his mother sharply ordered, "Stay right where you are." Ron shifted slightly but continued to stand, knowing that this would be unpleasant in as many ways as he could imagine.

His father cleared his throat in the silence; his normally jovial disposition was nowhere to be found. "Minerva, I suppose I'd like to say this is surprise, but we've read a couple of letters from Ginny lately that make me wonder if there is more going on than what there first appears to be."

A new level of dread fell on Ron as he thought about what his sister might have said about him, and what that might mean for his head-of-house bringing him home.

"I was reading a new letter from Ginny this morning about her delight in being asked to go to the Yule Ball by Harry, and how one of my sons," his mum paused and glared at him, "misbehaved during what should have been an exciting time for her. Does your presence here have to do with Ron's interrupting an invitation for my daughter?"

His professor put her cup down and looked his mum right in the eye. "While that incident may have been a precursor to the problem, I'm afraid it goes beyond that."

Ron wanted to wilt from the glare he received from his mother, as his fears were coming true -- this was not going to be good. There was no possible way it could come out to be any remote form of good. If fact, he thought he'd be lucky if the day turned out to be merely bad, but it appeared to be well on its way to a complete disaster. He was screwed.

"Please explain then, I'm most anxious to hear what happened," his mother said with a strange mixture of curiosity and anger.

McGonagall started her story with what she knew about the incident yesterday morning. As she explained that the story of interest had reached her ears before her first class yesterday, and had saddened her, she pointed out that these things tended to work themselves out so she tried to only be involved when strictly necessary. She did not mention the twins role in it, which Ron found frustrating, but his brothers had apparently worked things out. His head-of-house then proceeded to explain what had happened in the dorm room last night, repeating what Alan McWilliams had overheard as well as Ron's actions. The fact that Ron had had to sleep on her couch last night for everyone's well-being ended the story.

There was a deafening silence for one eternal moment, and then Ron jumped as he heard thunder. "RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? OR WERE YOU THINKING AT ALL?" He saw his mum go for her wand in her apron and almost fainted, already well familiar with the types of curses she used on errant children.

He was saved by his father, however, who not only seized his mother's arm, but also gently took her wand from her. She hardly paid any attention in her obvious rage.

"WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF AND IT HAD BETTER BE GOOD?!"

At that moment, Ron realized that he could probably not say anything that would satisfy his mother, but he had to try, since McGonagall only told half the story. "I was just trying to protect Ginny! Harry was trying to take advantage of her! You should have seen him, he trapped her..."

"Have you even talked to your sister recently?" His mum's shout had come down one level, though that did not stop Ron from cringing at the volume. "She is happy that she has finally gotten to go out with Harry! And you know quite well that she's liked him for years! That is the most pathetic excuse I've ever heard! Do you want to try again?"

Ron realized that this battle was lost, and he was all but checkmated. In silence, he shook his head and waited for the punishment to fall.

"Son, why are you suddenly at odds with Harry?" His father's calm tone belied the extremely disappointed expression Ron had seen on his face, but he knew that there would be no acceptance of his views here either. "I thought he was your best friend? That you were inseperable?"

"Harry's changed a lot this year, Dad. He's being a real prat." It sounded hollow to is own ears, but it was the best he could come up with that sounded even remotely workable as an opening gambit for getting control over the board.

"Is there anything else you need to tell us before we decide your punishment?" The complete lack of reaction told Ron everything he needed to know about how his father felt regarding his reply.

Since Ron could see his mother was still about blow her top, he dropped his gaze to his trainers and gave the only answer that was certain to end the conversation. "No, sir."

"What are the punishments you are considering, Minerva? I think we need to take those into account before we decide what to add to it." Ron winced as he heard his father say that.

"Young Mr. Weasley has not quite earned the right to be expelled, but a suspension is being considered, though that is something I'd like to talk about with you privately. Assuming he returns to school, he will have detention every night until the next term starts. He will also lose some privileges, such as being unable to attend the Yule Ball. Ronald, have you invited anyone to the Ball yet?"

"No, professor." It was much easier to study his shoes than look at anyone else in the room.

"That will make it easier on the young ladies then." Taking a breath, his professor continued her explanations. "I suppose we'll also have to alter sleeping arrangements, though I only have an idea at the

moment. In that regard, I'd like Ron to stay here for the weekend while I consider options and discuss them with the Headmaster. I'll send his trunk here after I return, so he'll have his clothes and books. If he returns, he can bring it all back with him."

Ron caught his father's expression out of the corner of his eye, as his father nodded and then fixed Ron with a stare, one that he knew was normally reserved for the twins when they went too far with something. "Son, go to your room and stay there until I tell you to come down."

Feeling shorter than a garden gnome as he realized how much he had let his parents down, he turned to go.

"And no stopping in the kitchen," his mother added.

Ron trudged out of the living room and went up to his room. He could swear he felt the eyes of his parents tracking him all the way there.

After her son had left, Molly looked at the Professor. "More tea, Minerva?" The teacher smiled faintly, though Molly thought her eyes held quite a bit of sadness, and held out her cup, which Molly filled. "Now, then, you mentioned you had some things about my pig-headed son to discuss in private."

"First, I probably should apologize..."

"No, you shouldn't," Molly told her. "This is about Ron's mistakes."

"Be that as it may, the reason I generally try to let the students work out their own problems is that it helps them grow up better. Also, most problems like this do work themselves out, usually within a day or two. However, that approach also means that when a truly big problem comes along, it gets blown out of proportion, and by the time I become involved, everything is much worse than it should be."

"As Molly said," Arthur interjected, "you are not at fault, Minerva." Molly could not resist giving her husband an appreciative smile. She knew he was always considerate of others, and careful to not let anyone take on more blame than they warranted.

"Thank you, Arthur. To give you a little bit of background, this whole problem seems to have started at the same time the Triwizard Tournament started. It was at that point that Ronald and Harry had a falling out."

"That's what Ginny told me in a letter. She said Ron was jealous of Harry," Molly offered, thinking about what might be the real source of her son's pointless envy.

"I would say that is accurate. They have had problems since then, and I have found the changes in both of them have been most interesting. Ronald has become more isolated, though he has some new friends in his other year-mates. Sadly, during this time, his grades have dropped dramatically. From what I understand, he is barely passing most of his classes, and is failing Potions and History of Magic outright."

Molly looked at Arthur for what he might think, but Arthur only raised an eyebrow before he turned to McGonagall. "Considering that Severus is teaching Potions, I suppose that's not a surprise, but why is he doing so poorly in his other classes?"

"The most obvious reason is because of his friends," McGonagall commented. "His new friends are only barely making an Exceeds grade in some of their classes, with an Average grade in the rest. Not only do they not push him to try harder, they do not work particularly hard themselves. So what is now happening is a result of Ronald's natural effort and work. In the past, he has had Miss Granger to push him and help him, which she no longer does. I have heard that the falling out between your son, Arthur, and Miss Granger is due to other factors than the issues between Harry and Ronald. But that led me to another interesting observation."

"Oh?" Molly asked. She was appalled that not only had her son been acting the cad, instigating trouble for Harry, but now he was on the verge of failing all of his classes. Arthur's hand on her forearm kept her from getting up and marching to Ron's room, but she was definitely going to have words with her son after this.

"The changes in Harry have been most interesting too. He is now doing better in all of his classes, even Potions, though the change there is small -- for the same reasons you understand about Ronald in that class. Yesterday, however, Harry surprised even me and outperformed Miss Granger in my class. In addition, Harry's core friends -- Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, and your own Ginevra -- have all improved in their grades over the last handful of weeks."

"Wait a minute," Molly interjected, her anger fading to puzzlement. "Are you saying that those four are doing better because Ron's not with them?"

Minerva now openly looked sad as she said, "Yes, that is my observation. The class performance of those four has gone up, and in some cases, quite substantially. I can't really make many comments about their personal lives, though I do believe Harry was unhappy to lose Ronald's friendship. At this late juncture, and after last night, I suspect that he's simply resigned to the loss."

"This seems so sudden," Arthur said before he fixed the professor with a concerned look. Molly could feel how tightly his fingers were gripping her forearm, but that was the only indicator he was providing over how upset he was. "Ginny has mentioned problems, but it never seemed so profound. I think we're going to have to discuss this at length before we can react fully." He turned slightly and met her gaze, so she smiled her agreement to him. After a moment, he turned back to McGonagall. "What are our options for Ron? What choices do we have?"

Finishing her current cup of tea, McGonagall put it down and ticked off the options on her fingers. "First, if you feel it best, you could withdraw him from Hogwarts and either home school him or send him to another school. I don't think you need to take that drastic of a step at this time, but it is an option."

Molly looked at Arthur abruptly, and saw the same troubled look in his eyes by that statement. Not even the twins had gotten into this much trouble.

"Second, you can take him out of school for a short time to help him understand what he's missing, before sending him back. You should understand that choice will actually make it harder on him academically. I don't recommend this, unless you think it's best."

"What do you recommend?" Molly asked, still worried over how bad the situation truly was.

"Third, let him come back after the weekend and put him on a short leash. I'll find a different place for him to sleep. My first inclination is to put him in the sixth year room where your other sons and a prefect can watch over him. That has its own problems, as I know that the twins may pick on him, so I would desire to discuss that option more if you choose to use it. I wish in this instance that Percy was still there, as that might have been ideal."

"That might work," Molly said slowly as she contemplated the idea. "Let us discuss that as we talk over everything else. We might need to talk to Fred and George too, so we can rein them in, at least as much as is possible."

After a brief silence, she felt Arthur squeeze her arm and let it go. "Minerva?" Arthur was obviously worried, but there was a hint of curiosity on his face. "Has any progress been made on finding out how Harry's name got put in the Goblet?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Albus is still keeping an ear open, but I doubt we'll know more until more information actually comes along. I think, at this point, that unless there is anything else you need, I probably should be going."

"Thank you, Minerva," Molly told her as they all stood up. "I'm sorry you're having to do this, although Ron is going to be sorry about it all as well."

Professor McGonagall smiled. "I'll leave his fate in your hands then. How about I return at four tomorrow afternoon so we can decide what will be done?"

"We'll see you then," Arthur agreed. After the teacher left, Molly sighed and looked at her husband. He was already looking at her, and his eyes told her he wanted to sound something out. "I have an idea..."

After waiting what seemed like forever to be called, his dad had come up to retrieve him and sent him down for lunch, where Ron was now working his way through his third sandwich. He was a bit surprised that his father did not come down to eat, but Ron was starving. Harry had told him that the Dursleys sometimes did not feed him every meal and he did not know how Harry managed that, since skipping breakfast had been bad enough. As he finished eating an early lunch, his parents sat down with him.

"Ron," his father started. "You have about twenty-eight hours to think about your situation in life and what you're going to do about it. I won't lie to you, son, you're not sitting at the head of the table right now. Other than coming down to eat and going to the bathroom, you are restricted to your room until four o'clock tomorrow afternoon." Ron blanched at the severe restrictions. "You are to think about how you got into trouble, why you're in trouble, and what changes you plan to make to get out of trouble. Tomorrow afternoon, Professor McGonagall will return, and at that time we will discuss your decisions and what happens to you."

Ron thought he had never seen his father so serious before, though he was not always privy to when his brothers had a stern talking to. His mum sat at the table frowning at him, but his father obviously had more to say. "I will warn you, do not decide to do something just because you think it's the answer we want to hear. Whatever you decide, it had better be because you think that is what you really want to do and plan to carry out, as you will be held to your decisions, whether it's to return to Hogwarts or not."

The boy gasped at the thought of not returning to school. He knew he was in trouble, and McGonagall had mentioned suspension as one possibility, but this was far more serious than he thought it would be.

His mother interrupted his slowly building understanding of the situation. "An elf brought your trunk so you have your clothes. I

suggest you go take a shower, get into some clean clothes, and start your thinking."

Ron nodded and grabbed his trunk and went upstairs. It did not take him long to notice that the Quidditch magazine he had been reading in his room was gone. Checking his room, he found that all of his magazines and anything he would have considered a toy or a diversion was missing. Looking in his trunk for some magazines he had taken to school, he found them and his chess set missing too. All he had was his books and sparse notes from class. Ron decided that it was going to be a very boring twenty-eight hours.

As the foursome sat down for lunch, they discussed their mutual surprise at Ron's absence, especially since Professor McGonagall was there. She had missed breakfast, so they had assumed she was dealing with Ron then. The fact that Ron's trunk had disappeared caused a number of questions, none of which could be answered. That did not prevent them from speculating, though, as they talked quietly amongst themselves.

After lunch, Hermione took them to their Transfiguration classroom. "I asked Professor McGonagall yesterday if we could borrow her room, and she said we could."

"Why did you want to come here?" Harry asked.

The brunette smiled and walked over to the side of the room where there was a Victrola. Starting the music, she moved to Neville and Ginny walked over to Harry. Very slowly, the girls started teaching the boys how to dance.

An hour and multiple bruised toes for the girls later, dancing lessons ended and spell lessons began. Due to sore feet, it was mostly duels between Harry and Neville, though the girls helped to shield Neville from the sidelines. At the end of the afternoon, all four of them thought sitting down for the rest of the evening to be a good thing. They sat around the fire in the Common Room talking, with Ginny holding Harry's hand. She also convinced the other three to tell her about the classes in the fourth year; she absorbed all the information she could as a plan started forming in her mind.

(Sun 11 Dec)

Ron's father appeared in his son's room promptly at four. He only said, "Follow me," before he left. Reluctantly, Ron stood up and walked down to the living room, following in the steps of his father, understanding that this was his moment of truth, as Hermione might have said. His head-of-house was there, too, which made him somewhat more uneasy with the discussion he knew was about to take place.

"Well, Ron, what do you have to say?" his father asked as he sat down in a chair. Ron made no attempt to sit, knowing his mother would deny him that privilege based on the unhappy expression on her face. "And I will remind you that you will be held to everything you say."

Ron knew he could not look at any of the adults and answer the question, so he looked at the table in front of them. "I've made some mistakes lately," he started off. "I'm still not certain who's right in my argument with Harry, but I could have been ... nicer." A part of him considered that Harry was probably right, but his pride would not let him fully admit that to himself, much less anyone else.

"As for Ginny, well, I still think I did the right thing by trying to protect her, but now I understand that I should've talked to her before doing anything." That was as far as he was willing to bend, since he still thought Potter was dead wrong in regards to his sister, no matter what the twins said.

"I see," his father said after a moment. "And what do you plan to do in the future?"

Ron took a moment to think about how to say it in a way that they would be willing to hear his answer. "I know I need to apologize to Harry. Beyond that, it's probably best if we don't spend much time together." Ron really wanted to add a clause to his statement, such as until I get over how I feel about him, but decided that would be a mistake. "I'll leave him alone."

"Anything else?" his mother asked.

"No, I think that covers it." He could not think of anything else that had to do with Harry, nor did he want to think of anything else.

"Nothing about your sister or your grades?" she asked.

"I know I need to study more, but I didn't think they were part of what we're talking about." He did his best to wiggle out of the topic. He did not want to have to tell them how many Dreadfuls he had received in the past month, not to mention the couple of Trolls he had received last week.

"What about your sister?" his father asked.

"I'll leave her alone, too. I still think it's wrong for her to be dating Harry. She's not old enough, and I'm not sure what his intentions are towards her, but I'll try to ignore that. I'll not cause any problems."

The elder Weasleys looked at each other for a moment, then Molly nodded. Arthur looked at his son again. "Very well, Ron. We'll let you return to school this evening."

His surge of hope of happiness was quickly dashed.

"However, we," his father pointed to all three adults, "will hold you to everything you just said. If you cause the slightest problem for Harry, Ginny, or anyone else, you will be pulled from Hogwarts and your mother will teach you at home. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Minerva, I guess we're ready for part two."

McGonagall tuned to regard Ron with what he felt was quite a bit of unhappiness. "Mr. Weasley?" she addressed him, "I will move you to a different dorm. Do not even think about going into the fourth year dorm, even if you are invited to do so by any of the occupants. Do not even think of fighting with them. You will have detention for four hours each night school is in session for the rest of this term, and eight hours each day over the holidays, except for Christmas and New Year's Day. Come see me for whom you will spend that time with.

You will also not be allowed to attend the Yule Ball. If you break any of these rules, you should expect to be suspended for at least one month, assuming the Headmaster and your parents let you return. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor," he said very contritely.

"Perhaps I am being slightly hard on you, but I am extremely shocked at your stated intentions towards Mr. Potter while you were fighting him, and I hope that by showing you a little severity now, we can avoid bigger problems later. You will please stay here, Mr. Weasley, while I bring other people here."

Ron watched his professor get up and walk to the Floo, not sure what she was talking about. After a brief conversation addressed to the Headmaster's office, he watched the Floo flare as four people came through. All hope of any reprieve left him as he saw the people that had been sent for.

His father addressed him while he was staring at the newcomers. "Ron, I believe you have something to say?"

For a moment, he was unsure what his father was referring to, when it occurred to him why his parents had kept asking about his sister and Harry. His voice was weak when he finally spoke, evidence of his true feelings on the topic. "Ginny, are you happy to be going to the Ball with Harry?" He did not want to remotely touch on the dating part.

"Yes," she said very evenly.

"Then I'm sorry for trying to interfere with you and Harry. I should've asked you earlier."

Ginny looked at him for a long moment before she finally said, "I accept."

Her tone was such that Ron knew she was doing it only because she had to, that she was expected to, and not that she particularly wanted to. That knowledge hurt, and caused him to understand a little bit more how much he had hurt her. Turning to Harry, he said, "Harry,

I'm sorry for the way I acted toward you. I ... I could have been more of a friend."

Harry looked at Ron steadily and showed almost no reaction. It was obvious to Ron that Harry did not miss the fact that Ron had not said anything about his insults to Harry, nor for anything he had said about Ginny. Ron knew it was a very generic apology, but he hoped Harry would accept it, and get him out of trouble. It was the tone of voice as much as the words that let Ron know Harry had decided not to make it easy on him. "Exactly what are you apologizing for, Ron?"

Ron looked down and took a very controlled deep breath. Taking a swing at Harry right now, no matter how much his temper made him wish to, would be the absolute worst possible thing he could do. Ron took another deep breath as he hoped to find the ability to say what he was supposed to say, rather than his more vague effort.

When he looked back up, Harry's hand was held by Ginny, and Ron saw a tiny impish smile on her face. As he noticed that, he also saw the twins were pulling their cheeks in slightly, in a rather obvious effort to control their reaction.

Blowing the deep breath out, Ron looked up at Harry who wore an expression of righteous indignation -- a look he probably deserved, Ron thought. "I'm sorry for all the rude comments I made to you. I'm sorry for trying to hit you. I'm sorry for trying to stop you from dating Ginny. You may date her, but I'd prefer not to know about it."

After a moment, Harry nodded and said, "I'll accept your apology for those things, as long as you never do them again." It was clear that while Harry accepted the apology offered, he was still bothered by something lacking from the list.

Ron nodded once sharply, and turned to his father, hoping he would realize that was about as good as it was going to get for now. It was equally likely his father would be under no illusion that was the end of the problems, either. Ron was relieved to see his father incline his head before he turned to his older sons, and said, "Fred, George, you're here because you're part of the family and need to know what's going on. You're also here because we have a ... request for

you. We need to move Ron to a different room at Hogwarts, and we want to know if he is moved into your room, will you let him live there in relative peace?"

The twins looked at each other and seemed to have some sort of silent conversation, while Ron felt the blood drain from his face. He was kicked out of his dorm, which he could understand to some extent, but the idea of living in the same room as the twins was beyond horrifying.

Before they could answer, their mother spoke up sharply. "Boys, we know how much you like to prank your brother. We also know better than to try to ask you to completely refrain from that, but whatever your answer is needs to tell us exactly how he will be treated." Ron almost groaned as he thought about the situation, since his parents were essentially saying they would turn a blind eye as long as nothing permanent was done.

Fred solemnly answered for them. "We'll mostly ignore him, Mum; and we also promise no pranks that last for more than an hour."

George nodded his agreement before he added, "We'll help keep him in line. He won't be bothering Harry or Ginny."

Ron saw his father exchange looks his mother, and the final nod and small grin that each delivered to the other. He knew now what his parents meant by adding to his punishment, but he sincerely hoped it did not get out of hand. His father turned back to him and Ron saw his face settle back into a sad demeanor. "It's agreed then. Ron, remember the rules, especially the one about not going into the fourth year boy's dorm room. You may get your trunk and return to school with the others. Professor McGonagall will be informing us not only how your punishments are going, but how you are doing in your classes too."

Ron nodded his agreement, thankful to finally be out of the unexpected confrontations, and went for his trunk. He had an axe over his neck now, and the worst thing was that he could see most of the problem was his own fault on some level. When he returned to the living room, Harry and Ginny were gone, but his brothers were

waiting. They returned with him and escorted him to their dorm room, where he found a smaller-than-normal bed in the corner, but it was still larger than the twin bed he had at home.

Settled in, he went to dinner. Sitting next to Dean and Seamus as usual, he found even they were reluctant to talk with him. Life sucked, Ron thought to himself, as the consequences for his actions were only getting worse. The only bright spot he could find was that he no longer needed to find a date for the Yule Ball, or worse, wear the hideous lacey robes his mother had given him.

(Sun 25 Dec)

Christmas morning, Harry received a surprise as he was awakened by Dobby. After he got over that shock, he got up and found some socks he had no problem parting with, and gave them to the small elf as a present. An incredibly happy Dobby gave Harry a present of the strangest socks he had ever seen. Afterwards, Harry woke Neville and they took all of the presents at the end of their beds downstairs to share the time with Ginny and Hermione. The girls were already there and waiting.

Ron was not there, which suited Harry and apparently everyone else, as no one asked about him. In a small attempt to be nice, Harry had bought five packages of Chocolate Frogs and given them to Ron. Amusingly, he found a present from Ron that contained three Chocolate Frogs.

In addition to the usual Weasley jumper and fudge from Mrs. Weasley, Harry received a book on advanced Defense spells from Hermione, a nice long maroon wool scarf from Ginny, and four pictures of his parents from Neville. One of the pictures was with another young couple.

Harry looked at his friend in amazement. "My Gran said she found them not too long ago, when she was cleaning the house. After she read about you being in the Tournament, she thought you might like them. That one picture also has my parents in it."

"Thanks, Neville!" Harry worked hard to keep his emotions in check, but the gift was incredibly valuable to him. With hesitation he asked, "Are you sure you don't want to keep this one with your parents?"

"It's all right, that's a copy. I have the original," Neville told him.

Harry was unable to stop the huge smile he gave his friend as he held the pictures close and studied every detail. Eventually putting the pictures down, Harry, wearing his new scarf, gave Hermione a quick hug as a thank you for the book, and a longer hug to his girlfriend for the scarf. She was apparently happy to hug him back for the three wire-thin gold bracelets, which now clinked together on her wrist every time she moved her arm.

After lunch, the four friends walked around the castle enjoying the day off, finally winding up outside to play in the snow. Before Harry realized what was happening, a snowball hit him in the back of the head. Spinning around, he found a laughing Ginny. With a devilish grin, he scooped up some snow and went after his now shrieking girlfriend.

A couple of hours later, four cold, snow-covered students returned to Gryffindor Tower. After warming themselves by the fire, they went to go get ready for the Yule Ball.

As Harry was working on his hair, trying in vain to make it lay flatter, Neville came up to him. "Hey, Harry. How about a game of chess while we wait on the girls? I almost had you last time. Besides, it will be at least an hour before they're ready."

Harry grinned at his friend. "If you think you can do better this time." Actually, Harry found that they were pretty evenly matched, which made the game a lot more fun for both of them, as compared to playing against Ron. "Basic black looks pretty good on you, Neville."

Neville returned the compliment. "Thanks, that dark green works well for you. You did that to match your eyes, didn't you?"

"Nope, not me," Harry said with a smile. "Mrs. Weasley picked them out for me, but I would guess that's probably why she chose them."

Come on, we can play in the Common Room so we don't miss the girls."

An hour later, Neville had won the first game, but Harry was in a good position to win the second one. That was when girls started coming down the stairs, looking for their partners. The two fourth year boys stood and straightened their robes, trying to be ready for their girls, making last minute adjustments. There were a little over a dozen other boys doing the same thing, Harry noticed.

Ginny carefully peered around the corner of the hallway at the bottom-most stairway landing, trying to spot Harry and Neville. "Hermione, they're down there waiting. Wow, they look good, too. If I wasn't with my Harry, I think Neville looks quite nice and would do just fine."

Hermione pulled her back and peeked at the common room herself. "I see what you mean. I would be happy with either one, too, but I know you like Harry far more than I do." Hermione pulled herself back around the corner, and Ginny watched her straighten out her robes for the last time.

Tired of waiting for Hermione to move, Ginny tried to hurry her along. "Shall we?" After a quick nod from Hermione, Ginny steered her friend down the stairs, and followed right behind her.

Ginny saw from her position higher up the stairs when Harry nudged Neville. "Look!" he said in a fierce whisper that was easily heard from where she was descending. Neville looked up at the sight on the girl's stairway and he went pale suddenly.

Ginny knew that Hermione was coming down the stairs in front of her, and she could see that Neville's eyes had firmly come to rest on the light blue dress that showed Hermione was definitely a girl. Her hair was also piled on top of her head in an elegant way instead of her usual bushiness.

As Ginny looked away from Neville's silent watching of Hermione, she saw Harry obviously admiring her sea green dress, even if her curves did not quite match Hermione's. Her red hair went up, then it

came back down in large graceful curls. She had spent far too long trying to make it look that way to stop and change it when Hermione pointed out it would make her look like a princess in Muggle stories. She hoped that Harry liked it anyway.

Ginny glided in front of Harry, coming to a stop just as Hermione reached Neville. Harry stepped forward and gave Ginny a quick kiss on the lips. "You're ..." he was shaking and tilting his head as he tried to work out his thoughts, "gorgeous," he finally got out, "but I'm not sure that's good enough to describe you."

Ginny smiled, thrilled at the genuine honesty in his compliment. "Thank you, you're quite handsome yourself, Mr. Potter."

"And you're beautiful, Hermione," Neville spoke up.

Ginny caught the beaming smile Hermione leveled at their friend. "Thank you, Mr. Longbottom. You've very nice looking this evening too."

With perfectly proper bows, Ginny and Hermione were faced with two boys who offered their arms formally, to which they laughed lightly and the two couples went to the Yule Ball.

In the Great Hall, the couples separated, as Harry was required to sit at the head table. This suited Harry quite well, as it meant he would have her all to himself during dinner. Unfortunately, her rather pompous brother was there, and any hope of close conversations fled his mind as the two Weasleys traded barbs. Several times, he almost had to restrain Ginny from doing something to Percy, who was there filling in for Mr. Crouch. To Harry, the interaction between the heads of the three schools was the most interesting part of that time.

When the meal was done, the four champions were directed to the dance floor. Taking Ginny in his arms, he nervously looked at her as he readied to dance.

"Relax, Harry," she whispered, "you'll do fine."

Indeed, as the music started, he concentrated on his feet, and less than a minute later, he had forgotten about his feet as he looked at his gorgeous partner. He had, it appeared, learned something in the eight hours of dancing lessons over the last few weeks. As the second song started, they kept dancing, but he was unable to take his eyes off of Ginny.

"Enjoying yourself, Harry?"

Ginny's question jolted him out of his enchantment, and he smiled softly at her. "Only because you're here with me. If you weren't, I wouldn't know how to dance, and I'd probably be sitting on the side all night being a boorish date."

When Ginny smiled brightly at him, he knew that she was happy to be there with him, too. They continued talking quietly of the evening -- the music, the people, and the couples -- as they continued to dance. After the fifth song ended, Neville met Harry and they traded partners for a song.

"Enjoying yourself, Hermione?" Harry asked as they danced, thinking that Ginny's question was perfect for the situation.

"Very much. And I haven't had my toes stepped on, not once the entire night," she told him with a grin on her face.

"I could change that," he joked with her.

With a light laugh, she said, "No! Thank you, though, Harry, that's quite all right. I'm enjoying myself as it is now, but if that changes, I'll let you know."

"You do look like you're having a good time. Are you glad you came with Neville?"

His friend hardly hesitated, but Harry saw her eyes flit over to where Neville was talking and dancing with Ginny. "Yes, I am. He's very nice, and, well, he's changed a lot over these last months. He's started to gain some confidence, and that's bringing out the real Neville, I think. I like him, and I like who he's becoming."

"I agree. As much as I hate to say it, I think I'm enjoying Neville's company more than Ron's, though I do need to get Neville more interested in Quidditch," he said with chagrin.

Hermione laughed lightly again, but shook her head at the same time. "I don't know, Harry, I think he's just fine in that regard as he is now." The song ended and they both looked around, but did not see their partners. "Shall we get a drink while we wait for them?"

Harry agreed, so they went to find some punch. Very shortly, Neville found them. "Where's Ginny?" Harry asked, curious as to where his girlfriend was.

"Oh, we started coming over here and someone else asked her to dance, uh, Michael Corner, I think. She said it was okay, so I let her go."

"I see," Harry said. He was not upset, but he did start scanning the crowd for her as he contemplated why the thought of her with a strange boy bothered him slightly. A moment later, he saw them dancing, and Harry recognized that it was indeed Corner that was with her. Harry noted that Corner had his hands in the right places, so he just stood there, watching and trying to understand what he was suddenly feeling. Ginny seemed to be casually talking to the bloke while they danced.

"You know," Hermione's voice said by his ear, "from a distance, Michael could almost pass for you, Harry. Except for his height, he's somewhat taller than you. He's thin and has short dark hair, though, like you do."

"Are you saying she's attracted to him?"

"What?! No! Not in the slightest. Ginny only has eyes for you, Harry. I was just pointing out that if you want to know what you and Ginny look like when you're dancing, that," Hermione's hand shot out and pointed at Michael and Ginny, "is what you look like."

"Oh." The song was coming to an end, so Harry walked across the dance floor as the music faded. As the next song started, it looked like Corner wanted to continue to dance with Ginny, which bothered Harry more for some reason. "Excuse me," he said politely, "but I'd like my girlfriend back now."

Corner looked at him and smiled. "Certainly, Harry. She dances quite well; thank you for allowing me the honor." The dark haired boy moved his hand that held Ginny's over to Harry, and Harry took her hand. Corner then calmly walked off, although Harry watched him for a couple of seconds wondering about him and his intentions.

Harry asked somewhat absently, "Would you like some punch, Ginny?" before he turned back to his date.

"Certainly. I think some fresh air might be nice too, like maybe in the rose garden."

"Oh, are you hot now?" he asked, as he finally identified the jealousy bubbling right below the surface of his mind.

"No, but it might be nice to spend some time with my boyfriend -- alone," she told him coyly.

Harry's jealousy evaporated instantly as he saw the look on her face and her words registered. He grasped her hand firmly in his as they got some punch, before they walked out into the rose garden outside. It was a bit cool, but some warming charms had obviously been placed in the garden, so it was not too uncomfortable.

They had not walked far when they heard Snape and Karkaroff talking, and the two seemed to be on a very comfortable first-name basis. Harry and Ginny had not heard more than a few snippets before Snape blasted some bushes with his wand, sending a couple running inside.

The blast also knocked a bug flying, and it landed on Ginny. As she felt it, she exclaimed, "What's that on my shoulder?"

Harry looked over and saw a beetle on her shoulder. He quickly grabbed it and tossed it on the ground with enough force that it bounced twice. "Strange to see a bug at this time of year. Oh well, the bug is gone, whatever it was. Why don't we walk the other way, away from Snape?" Ginny nodded, and, as they left, Harry accidentally stepped on the slightly stunned beetle, squashing it on the stone pavement as they went to find their own little alcove in the bushes.

A few minutes later, they had found a secluded bench and Ginny was sitting on Harry's lap. After kissing him soundly a few times, she decided it was time to experiment. Breaking from his lips, she put some of Angelina's knowledge to work and started trailing kisses over to his ear, which she nibbled on, before she started kissing down his neck. Harry just held onto her waist and groaned softly, which somehow encouraged her.

"W-Where did you learn that?" he whispered.

She moved her head to the other side of his neck. In between kisses, she breathily told him, "From my two adopted big sisters." She pulled on his earlobe gently with her teeth before she sat back up. "You can do the same thing to me, Harry. Just don't swallow the earrings." She barely suppressed her giggle at the thought of Harry having to see Madam Pomfrey over their kissing.

Very gently, Harry returned the favor of kisses all over her face and neck, which Ginny enjoyed immensely. She needed to find a way to thank her big sisters, but that would have to wait until some other day. Twenty minutes later, they heard Snape coming their way, so they quickly left their spot and returned to the Great Hall. After what seemed like too short a time of dancing, talking, and chatting with their friends, the Ball finally ended.

With great reluctance, the two lovebirds walked back to Gryffindor Tower. As they walked in through the Portrait hole, they saw Neville giving Hermione a chaste kiss on the lips. Their smiles turned into grins when they saw her lean back into him and kiss him back, not quite so chastely.

After a long good-night kiss, Harry and Ginny went up to bed. Both were sure it had been the best evening they had ever had. In the doom room, Harry saw Neville with a smirk that would not go away, and the Boy-Who-Lived understood perfectly.

(Mon 26 Dec)

During breakfast the next morning, each of the foursome had a obviously contented look on their face. Ginny finally interrupted the silence which was ready to eternally stretch out with far too much goofy grinning. "So I guess everyone enjoyed the Ball last night?"

She felt Harry squeeze her hand under the table. Neville looked bashfully down, though he still had a big goofy grin on his face. Hermione blushed slightly, but that and the small smile on her face said plenty.

"So, is there a future for you two?" Harry asked.

Neville really blushed, but Hermione said, "Only time will tell. Speaking of time, isn't it time to work on your egg clue, Harry? The sooner you know what it says, the better prepared you'll be. After all, you might have to learn some new spells for it."

Harry grinned at Ginny and she softly whispered to his ear, "Nice deflection." It was amusing to her to watch him try to contain his laughter.

It was obvious he did not want to work on the egg, but Ginny knew they could count on one hand the number of times Hermione had been wrong. That said it was usually good to listen to her advice, if not a requirement for staying alive at times. "Yeah," Harry finally gave in, "you're probably right. Let's find an empty classroom after breakfast and work on it." Harry did his best to finish off his food quickly, though Ginny was happy he never released her hand under the table.

As they all started to leave, Ginny noticed that Ron was getting up from the table too, so she nudged Harry. They watched as her brother trudged over to Professor McGonagall, who passed him to Professor Sprout with a small gesture. Ginny knew a small part of

Harry was sorry for his former friend, but it was only a small part. He had told her enough lately that she understood he was mostly happier with life now, despite how the changes came about.

A few minutes later, with egg in hand, they were all in an unused classroom. Opening the egg for a few seconds to remind them what it did, Harry quickly closed it back up as Ginny clapped her hands over her ears.

"What are we supposed to do with that?" Ginny asked rhetorically, since no one else was speaking.

"Well," Harry offered after a moment, "since it's so loud, my first thought is to try to muffle it."

"Maybe put it under blankets or something?" Neville suggested. Everyone looked at Hermione.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I can conjure a blanket. You two hold out your arms." When Ginny and Neville did that, she conjured a half dozen blankets for each of them.

Harry opened the egg back up and they started throwing blankets on top of it. While it did muffle the sound from the egg, all it seemed to give off was noise, even after they covered the egg in a dozen blankets. With a sigh, they started Vanishing the blankets until only the screeching egg was left, and Harry promptly slammed it shut.

"Next?" Harry asked.

After a thoughtful pause, Hermione said, "Some things sound different far away than close up. How about if you open the egg while I stand outside the room?"

Harry shrugged. "Only if you conjure me some cotton balls first." Hermione waved her wand over her hand and held two little white balls out to him. With a smile, he stuffed one in each ear as the rest of the group walked to the door. He opened the egg as they hurried out the door and then closed it. A moment later they came back in.

"Well?" he asked as he pulled the cotton out of his ears.

"Sorry, mate," Neville told him. Ginny just shook her head, then sidled up to Harry and held his hand, offering what support she could given her lack of ideas.

"You know, I did hear something different with the cotton in my ears," Harry told them. "It almost sounds like there are voices, but I couldn't quite make out anything useful."

Hermione grinned brightly at Harry. "Ah, we're making progress then. What else can be in your ears that affects your hearing?"

"My fingers," Harry suggested. Hermione rolled her eyes and Ginny found herself laughing briefly with Neville.

"I sometimes get too much wax in my ears," Neville sheepishly mumbled.

Neville's comment reminded Ginny of being in the bathroom, and that led her to a new idea. "Water! I can't hear well after I wash my hair and don't get all the water out," Ginny said.

"Yeees," Hermione drawled and paced around, obviously thinking it through. "And things sound different under water too. Brilliant, Ginny!" Hermione looked around the room briefly, before she pointed her wand and cried, "Accio bucket!" A moderate-sized bucket flew to her hands and she looked in it briefly before dropping it with a scowl. "Eww, Scourgify!"

Ginny inspected the bucket briefly, and seeing it was now clean, she nodded at Hermione. Her friend pointed her wand at it and said, "Engorgio!" When it was the size of a respectable washtub, she looked at her friends and said, "Help me so we'll get done faster. Aguamenti!" As she started filling the large tub, the others realized her goal almost simultaneously. Pulling out their wands, the four quickly filled the tub. "Well, go on, Harry," Hermione urged him when they finally had the basin full of water.

Harry put the egg in the water and opened it. It bubbled some and made a sound, but it was not unpleasant -- it was almost like a song. Ginny watched him as he bent the rest of the way down and put his ear to the water, but she was unsure why he was doing that. After half a second, he jerked his head back up. "It's singing! Singing words!"

Hermione pulled her hair back around one shoulder and put her ear to the water. Her eyes lit. "Yes, this is the clue. Ginny, you have good handwriting. Get something to write with out of my bag." Ginny dug around in the brunette's bag and eventually pulled out parchment, quill, and a bottle of ink. When she looked back up, Hermione had her in-command face set, and Ginny watched her turn back to Harry. "Close it, then open it again so it will restart. Oh, stick your ear in here and help me make sure I get it right. Quickly, now!" When Harry restarted it, Hermione repeated the clue in the other-worldly voice and Ginny transcribed with Neville looking over shoulder to make sure she wrote it correctly. With the clue written down, they all gathered around a table to look at it.

"Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour -- the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"

"Well, Harry, it looks like you have to go search for something where the Merpeople are," Hermione stated calmly. "They are a people who live under water and they are known to sing. Plus we do have some who live here."

"What? In the lake?" Harry looked far from pleased at that.

"It would be helpful to know where in the lake they live," Neville offered. "It's a pretty big lake."

"Yes, and it appears that you'll have a time limit this time, unlike with the dragon," Ginny said as she continued to study the clue. "See the fifth and seventh lines, and how they're worded."

"I wonder what they'll take of yours, Harry," Hermione pondered. "I mean, it must belong to you, or at least be important to you, because you'll sorely miss it."

"Hmm, I don't know what that would be. I don't have much that's important to me that others would know about other than my broom and, of course, the three of you." Harry could not think of anything else to add to the list. His special cloak and map were fairly secret and known only to a select few.

Hermione looked around for a moment before she gasped abruptly. "Of course! But Dumbledore wouldn't really put anyone in danger; no, he wouldn't do that."

"What, Hermione?" Neville asked.

The older girl looked at the younger girl, and Ginny felt her stomach fall to the floor as she barely heard Hermione whisper, "Ginny."

It took a few seconds, but Harry suddenly figured out what Hermione meant just as Ginny had. "No! They can't have her! The risk is too great!"

"Harry," Ginny softly called his name, "I'm sure Dumbledore would make sure I'm safe." She was nervous about this, but understood that it made the most sense if you read the clue in the right way.

Harry turned to her and wrapped her in his arms, "I know I should trust Dumbledore, but how can I really? He was supposed to have protected me by making sure my name wasn't even in the Goblet of Fire, but it still went there anyway, and he still doesn't know how my name got in there. Someone wants me killed, it's the only logical reason for me to have been entered in the Tournament. You were barely my friend then, Ginny, but I couldn't let anything happen to you. You - you mean too much to me now."

Ginny could not help herself and threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his head down the couple of inches to her, and kissed him gently, then more passionately.

Ginny ignored the background shuffle of feet, and trusted that Hermione and Neville would understand, and find something to do for a few moments. Eventually, Ginny broke the kiss, and whispered, "I care about you too, Harry."

"I don't know how I'll do it, but I won't let them take you, Ginny," Harry's voice, ragged with emotion, echoed loudly in the room.

Looking over his shoulder, Ginny saw Hermione watching them beside Neville, who was staring out the window. With a loud sigh, Hermione brought them back to business. Ginny disengaged from Harry but still held his hand, as Hermione said, "We have one more problem, beyond working out where the Merpeople live. You're going to have to do something to allow you to be underwater for longer than you can hold your breath."

"Isn't there a spell for that? I think I've seen my brothers do it," Ginny asked quietly. "It's puts a bubble of air around their head."

"Yes, the Bubble Head charm. I'll have to go research it to learn it. It's a NEWT level charm," Hermione told them.

"Or Gillyweed would work," Neville suggested. "Actually, it would probably be better." Ginny stared at him along with the other two. "It's a plant that gives you gills and webs your hands and feet so you can swim better. If you take the right amount, it should last an hour or so. You could even get some before hand, and practice with it." Hermione looked a little put out that Neville had known something she had not, but Ginny was just happy to have a solution for Harry.

"Thanks, Neville!" Harry was obviously happy too, until he asked another question. "But where do we get it?"

"Snape," Neville spat with some disgust, "probably has some in his private storerooms, but good luck getting it. If it were me, I'd probably order it out of a catalog. You need to order it soon, though, as it may

take a couple of weeks to get here. The task isn't until almost two months from now, but you'll want to practice first, so if you order now, you should have time."

"And this is why we start our homework early," Hermione told them all. The three laughed at the stereotypical Hermione statement, and she eventually joined them. Harry took his egg while Hermione Vanished the water and returned the tub to a modest bucket. They went up to the fourth year boy's dorm room to look at Neville's plant catalogs. An hour later, Hedwig was winging her way towards London with a letter and some Galleons in a pouch.

After lunch, Hermione bid them good-bye for a while as she headed to the library to work on some Transfiguration homework. Neville left too, claiming the same subject for him. Harry had already done his Transfiguration work, though he had some Potions research to do. Still, he could not bring himself to do it at that moment. Ginny said she had some Arithmancy homework, so Harry sat down with her to see what she was doing. It was mostly just math.

"That doesn't look too hard," he told her as he looked in her book.

"You're at the beginning where it's supposed to be easy to get you going. Start flipping through it until you get to something you don't understand, and then let's see where you are." Ginny returned to her homework and Harry quietly looked at her book.

Several problems later, he looked up to see Ginny staring at him, and he realized he was over half way through her book for the year.

He shrugged slightly, pointed to the page he was on, and said, "It starts getting a hard for me about here."

Ginny looked at the work he was pointing to and gasped. "We're not supposed to be starting that until late January!" She stared at him for another moment before she finally asked, "Do you know everything before this section, Harry?"

"Pretty much, or at least I've seen it before when I was in Muggle primary school. There's some more in there I could do too, but my memories are a little fuzzy. Why?"

Ginny had what she considered to be an outlandish thought shortly after he had asked her to the Ball, but the more she thought about it, the more she thought she might be able to make it happen with some work. She looked back into Harry's eyes, and decided to carefully approach the concept with him. "Uh, you've said you don't like your Divination class, right?"

"Sure, I hate it. I only took it because Ron wanted to. We're not partners in there anymore, so it's even worse than usual. Trelawney's such a fraud, well, except for that once last year and I don't think she even knew what she said. Near as I can tell, you're either a born seer or you aren't, so the class is pretty useless."

From what Ginny knew and had heard from Hermione, she agreed wholeheartedly with Harry's comments. "Why don't you drop Divination and change to Arithmancy, then?"

"What? I'd be like a year and a half behind."

"For your year, yes, but you could take it with my class." When he started to protest, she stopped him. "Harry, that spot you pointed to is where my class will be in about a month, so you already know over a complete term's worth now. And if you're going to switch, the sooner the better, as you'll have less to catch up on."

He paused and clearly thought about it for a minute. "I'm still not sure I could do it, Ginny..."

"Afraid of what people would say about a fourth year taking a third year class? Especially Malfoy?" she guessed from his expression.

"Yeah," he said looking down. "I can handle Malfoy if I need to, but the idea as a whole is hard to deal with. What would people say?"

Ginny took his hand. "Maybe they'd say it's so sweet that you're taking a class with your girlfriend." That made him smile. She leaned over and kissed the corner of his mouth. "There is another aspect to all of this, if you'd like for me to let you on a secret, but we'd have to go talk to Professor McGonagall."

"Huh?"

"I need to talk to Professor McGonagall about an idea, and your switching classes goes along with it. Shall we go find her?"

"Wait, you aren't going to tell me your idea first?" Harry asked curiously.

"Nope, it will be more fun to shock you in front of McGonagall. Come on." She got up and put her few things into her book bag and grabbed his hand. Leading him out the Portrait hole, they found their head-of-house in her quarters.

An hour later, an obviously shocked Harry and a very happy Ginny walked back into Gryffindor Tower to put her things away before dinner. "Remember, Harry. You help me and I'll help you, and next year can be a lot more fun." Harry just mutely nodded, and Ginny knew he was still not fully sure what he had gotten himself into.

It did not take long for this new decision to make itself known. The next day, Harry was pouring over Ginny's Arithmancy book, while he was waiting on his book to come via owl-order, when Hermione came up and saw what he was doing.

"Harry? Why are you looking at Ginny's Arithmancy book?"

He sheepishly looked up at his friend. "Uh, because, I've dropped Divination and picked up Arithmancy instead."

"What?!" Realizing she was making a commotion, Harry waved her to sit down at the table next to him. She looked around for a moment, before blushing faintly and dropping into the seat he had indicated. "Harry, I admire your courage to switch to a more respectable subject, but you can't join my class. You're a year and a half behind."

He smirked at her. "I won't be joining your class, at least not anytime soon. I'll be joining Ginny's class."

"You will?"

"Yeah, I talked Professor McGonagall into letting me do that. I already know all the maths they covered in their first term. Then I'm going to work very hard this term and over the summer to try to catch up to you. If it all goes well, I'll join you in your class next year. At least, that's the plan," Harry explained.

"I'm really impressed, Harry. Do you need any help?"

"Not yet, but don't worry, I'll definitely ask for help later. Besides, I know how good you are at this, so you'd be the obvious person to ask anyway."

Hermione blushed slightly. "Thanks, Harry. I'll let you study then."

Harry went back to Ginny's book and continued with advanced fractions and their application to gemstones.

(A/N: The egg clue comes from book4, "The Goblet of Fire", by JKR.)

Chapter 4: Into Cold Water

(Thu 23 Feb)

Practice for the tournament went well that evening. Harry thought he had a good handle on the spells to deal with Grindylows and a number of other underwater creatures he was likely to encounter. In addition, Ginny had talked to Moaning Myrtle and convinced the ghost to tell her the location of the Merpeople village. Myrtle had gone through the pipes and visited them before in the middle of the lake.

Feeling good about his chances, as long as something not too unexpected happened, Harry led the foursome from their practice classroom back to the Gryffindor Tower. They were quite surprised to see Professor McGonagall there.

"There you all are, I've been waiting for you," their professor said.

"I wasn't aware there was something I needed to do this evening," Harry said. He was as polite as always to her, but he was also very cautious, as he felt sure she knew why she was here and looking for them. Very slowly, he moved his hand into his robes.

McGonagall looked at him and gave a very slight smile. "I'm not here for you, Mr. Potter. I need to talk to Miss Weasley." She turned to look at the third year. "Miss Weasley, if you would come with me please?"

Harry stepped in front of his girlfriend standing straight with his wand now at his side. "No, I'm sorry, I won't let you take Ginny. You'll have to use someone else for bait." He did his best not to be rude, but he was determined to protect his girlfriend.

Minerva McGonagall was shocked. She had never heard Harry tell any professor no, and certainly not with the confidence and determination he had now. It was like he was a different young man. Still, she was his head-of-house. "Mr. Potter, you will not speak with me that way or you will be in detention."

"My pardon, professor, I mean no disrespect. I only mean that you may not take Ginny to use as bait in the second task. I know what's going to happen, as I've worked out the clue, but she may not go as it is not safe for her."

A glance to Harry's other friends showed their concern too. They did not have their wands out as he did, but she could tell they did not want Ginny to go either. This was most unusual. She also noted that everyone in the Common Room was watching this growing spectacle. As much as she wanted to move this confrontation to a more private setting, she doubted that was possible without making the situation worse. "Mr. Potter, you know the Headmaster would never willingly put anyone in danger. Miss Weasley will be quite safe."

Harry did not back down. "I believe that, Professor, but the keyword you used was 'willingly'. I don't trust Mr. Bagman, Mr. Crouch who seems to have gone missing, or Professor Dumbledore to keep Ginny safe. They couldn't even keep my name out of the Goblet. It's only in the last week or two that I've truly realized just how unsafe the Tournament is."

Minerva sighed. She could not fault his logic, and if Harry knew there were two former Death Eaters at the school now, he would probably be even more stubborn about this. There was another chance to salvage the situation, however. "Miss Weasley?" She peered at the petite girl who was looking over Harry's left shoulder. "Despite Mr. Potter's concern, would you be willing to come anyway?"

With more defiance than Minerva would have thought possible, Ginny said, "Can you guarantee my safety? And before you answer, don't forget what happened in Harry's first year, my first year, all the Dementors that attacked us last year, and as Harry pointed out, the fact that he should not even be in this Tournament now." When she did not answer immediately, she heard Ginny also say, "This school is not as safe a place as everyone makes it out to be. Harry has every right to be concerned for his friends."

McGonagall could not argue against that either, but she had to have 'what he would sorely miss'.

"I'll go," Neville volunteered as the silence stretched out.

McGonagall was pleased at the fact that someone was willing to offer a solution, but it was obvious Harry was not pleased. "What?!" She watched as Harry turned to his friend.

"I know it can't be Ginny, and it can't be Hermione either. You'll need them both to help you get ready tomorrow. I don't think anyone wants to hurt me and I trust you to come get me, Harry. Just make it as fast as you can. All right?" Neville's logic was in good form, and McGonagall was tempted to award points to him for his courage and intellect.

"You sure, mate?" Harry asked Neville very sincerely.

"Yeah, because Professor McGonagall has to take someone back or you'll be dealing with the whole committee, and that would be hard, even for you," Neville said with a grin. McGonagall had to fight a smile at the boy's words, for he had no idea just how true the prediction was.

"Thanks, Neville, I owe you a lot for this," Harry said as he gripped his friend's shoulder.

"Naw, I'm just paying you back for what you already did. Just beat everyone else tomorrow." She waited as Neville walked over to Hermione and gave her a quick hug, which she returned along with a quick peck on the cheek. McGonagall chose to turn a blind eye to the proceedings, although she did see Neville blushing as he turned to face her squarely. "All right, I'm ready."

Minerva shook her head slowly at the situation she never expected to find and said, "This way then, Mr. Longbottom." She led Neville towards the room off the Great Hall where the Tournament Champions had first met. Along the way she reflected on the changes that had come over Mr. Longbottom. His closer friendships with Harry, Hermione, and to at least some degree Ginny, had worked wonders on the boy's self-confidence. He was still quite shy in many areas, but she could not have imagined him helping his friend out like this at the beginning of this year. "Mr. Longbottom," she said as they finally

approached their destination, "take twenty points for your bravery, loyalty, and intelligence." While her charge gaped at her, she gave him one of her cultivated rare smiles. "You did a noble thing, and you deserve to be rewarded for it."

Neville was amazed. Not only had he just earned points for doing what he felt was right, but his head-of-house had openly praised him. He knew his jaw was hanging as they entered the waiting room, where Neville saw Cho Chang, a little blonde haired girl that must have been Fleur's little sister they looked so much alike, and a shorter version of Viktor Krum -- his little brother Neville assumed. The rest of the Tournament committee members were there too.

Albus Dumbledore frowned as he observed Neville walking in. "Minerva, I'm afraid you made a mistake."

"There's been a change in plans, Albus. Miss Weasley is unable to come due to unforeseen circumstances. Mr. Longbottom is Mr. Potter's current best friend, so I believe he will do admirably."

"Perhaps I should go get Miss Weasley..."

"Don't trouble yourself, Albus. Mr. Longbottom has volunteered to be 'bait' as Mr. Potter put it. I highly doubt you will find Miss Weasley this evening if you go look, and I know I shan't bother. But I do highly suggest you make sure these young people are kept completely safe, unlike what has not happened in the past. Good-night."

As Neville watched Professor McGonagall leave, he was emboldened even more by her standing up to the Headmaster; he also found new level of respect for his head-of-house. With a shy smile, he looked at Professor Dumbledore and waited for whatever would happen. While Harry had not said anything to him, he suddenly had no doubt that Professor McGonagall was correct. Harry would make sure Ginny could not be found tonight.

Dean looked over at Harry who was putting his heavy cloak on and pulling his Firebolt out of his trunk. "What are you up to, Harry?"

"I'm nervous about tomorrow. I need to fly a little to calm my nerves."

"But Harry, it's nighttime, and there's not much of a moon out. You could run into ... things," Seamus pointed out.

With his back to his dorm mates, Harry pulled his Map and Invisibility Cloak out and put them under his cloak. "I'll be back before morning, don't wait up for me."

"What if someone comes up here looking for you?" Dean asked.

"Tell them the truth, I went flying to calm my nerves."

"You know how much trouble you'd get in for that?!" Dean asked incredulously.

"Nope. But if I'm lucky, they'll kick me out of the Tournament I was never supposed to be in. See you in the morning." Harry went over to the window and opened it. It was cold outside, but he did not plan to be in it for long. A quick glance at the already activated map showed Ginny to be in position; he had to agree with Ginny that, while extreme, this idea was probably for the best.

Mounting his broom, Harry flew out the window, then he turned around and pushed the window closed. Moving out of sight, he pulled his Invisibility Cloak out and put it on while he hovered. Flying around the Tower to another window down one level, he hovered and very lightly tapped on the glass. It opened immediately. He pulled his father's cloak back so the front of his broomstick was visible. A slender person in a heavy cloak crawled out the window and he helped her on his broom before putting his Invisibility Cloak around her too. Her window was also pushed closed.

Slowly they flew across the grounds to the Whomping Willow. There, Harry found a rock that he Banished at a specific knot on the tree. It had been hard to hit in the low light from a crescent moon, but they both saw the tree go limp. Quickly, they went down the hole at the tree's base and into the passageway to the Shrieking Shack. Harry lit his wand and led them in before the tree woke up from its temporary slumber. After a turn in the tunnel, Harry stopped and looked at his companion. "I think this will do."

"I can't believe we're doing this, Harry, even if it was my idea."

He smiled as he cast a couple of cushioning charms and a warming charm on the area. The Invisibility Cloak was set to the side, but they both kept their long cloaks on. "In some ways I can't either, but I thought you had a good point. Dumbledore might come to look for you and I won't be able to fully concentrate if I thought you were down in the lake. I respect him greatly, but I'm starting to wonder about his mindset." Harry sat down and found a comfortable position.

"You think he's going senile?" Ginny sat down in front of Harry and leaned against his chest. She smiled as he put his arms around her.

"I don't know how else to explain it. Some of his decisions seem to be pretty big lapses in judgment, although I believe his heart's in the right place."

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the wind making odd sounds from the mouth of the passage. Ginny was unsure what to think of Harry's concerns, but she had to agree that from the outside, it seemed like there was something strange going on with the Headmaster. Eventually, she snuggled in closer to Harry, and turned her face up to him slightly. "Let's sleep, Harry. You need to be rested for tomorrow." She carefully twisted further and let him find her lips. After a wonderful good-night kiss, she settled back against him again and had beautiful dreams, including one with children with messy black hair.

(Fri 24 Feb)

Harry's watch alarm went off as the sun was coming up. He was a bit stiff, but otherwise felt very rested. The area around them was cool again, the warming charm gone, but that did not matter; they were about to leave. "Ginny? Time to wake up," he told her and then kissed her cheek back near her ear.

"Umm, nice way to wake up," she said groggily as she stretched.

He chuckled and helped her up, all the while mentally agreeing with her. Lighting his wand again, he grabbed his other cloak before they made their way back towards the willow. Pressing the knot, they left

the still tree behind. Flying back up to the Tower, Ginny let herself back into her room with his special cloak and the instructions that she was not to come down before thirty minutes without raising mayhem loud enough to wake the dead, should she be forced to go somewhere. Harry doubted that would happen, but Ginny was becoming precious to him. That was something he would not have thought possible at the beginning of the year.

Harry returned to his dorm, quickly took a shower, grabbed a few things he needed for today's task, and went to the Common Room. There he could guard the girl's stairs while he reviewed spells he might have to use.

A little before most of the students would come down for breakfast, he saw Hermione descending, so he got up to go over to her. "All here?" Harry quietly asked. He heard a giggle from the space next to Hermione, then a slightly freckled face suddenly appeared. He quickly kissed it before it disappeared again. "Go get breakfast in the kitchens then make sure Ginny is safely hidden. I'm counting on you, Hermione."

"I'll take care of her, Harry. It's a good thing you took my advice. Professor Dumbledore did come into the Tower last night to speak with you just after you both left. He was not pleased when he couldn't find either of you."

"So I get detention with Filch or something. I still find it worth it. See you later after the task." The two girls left Harry. He returned to his seat by the fireplace until breakfast was to start.

As Harry was about to head to breakfast, he found three Weasley brothers in front of him. Ron looked the angriest, Fred and George looked merely unhappy.

"Harry?" One of the twins addressed him. "They say Dumbledore could not find you in the dorm last night, and that Ginny was missing too. What do you have to say about that?"

"I would say that Professor Dumbledore was about to keep her as safe as he did her first year here. So I helped her hide, so she

actually would be safe," Harry said calmly, though his hand was on his wand under his robes. All three Weasleys blanched at his statement, as memories of their hurt sister the summer after her experiences in the Chamber of Secrets probably came to mind, as he had intended.

"And where is she now?" the other twin asked.

"Still hidden with a friend. You'll see her once the task has started. And if she's not there at the end of the task, you have my word Dumbledore will answer to me for her safety."

"Good enough," the first twin said before he started to go.

"But..." Ron started to complain.

The other twin stared down Ron. "If you don't believe him, you can ask Ginny when you see her. If she disagrees, I'll help you pound him."

"But if Harry is right, you might find yourself taking a swim with the giant squid," the first twin said. "Choose wisely, brother."

While Ron looked at his two brothers, clearly trying to figure them out, Harry left for the Great Hall. He was still disappointed in Ron. He had thought Ron was starting to make progress, but apparently not.

Harry had breakfast with Dean and Seamus; they confirmed that Dumbledore had come up looking for him and that the Headmaster was not happy Harry had left. Harry had understood that might happen and had taken action anyway, prepared to pay any consequences from those actions. Perhaps it was the wrong thing to do, but what was done was done. Munching on toast, as that was about all his nerves would allow at the moment, he felt someone walk up behind him. Expecting to see Malfoy preparing to taunt him yet again, he was surprised to find the Headmaster.

There was no twinkle in the old man's eye. "Mr. Potter, would you come with me please? I'd like a moment of your time before you have to go to your task."

Grabbing his juice glass for a last swallow, he got up and followed the Headmaster into the trophy room off to the side of the Great Hall. He knew this was going to be hard, but no matter how much he saw the old wizard as a grandfather-like figure and trusted him, Harry was determined to stick to his beliefs in this matter.

"Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said formally after they were alone, "I found that you were not in your dorm room last night after curfew. As that is against school rules, I'd like an explanation."

Harry avoided looking the Headmaster in the eye. There was something about doing that that seemed like the old man could see through to his soul. "I was nervous about the task today sir, so I decided to take my broom and go flying. It always calms me down." That was his prepared cover story, even though Harry knew it was unlikely to work. Hermione had mentioned that the Headmaster had looked for Ginny as well.

"I see. Mr. Potter, I'm also told that Miss Weasley was not in her dorm room either. This is not the sort of thing we condone at this school. Perhaps I need to tell her mother." The threat was slight, but present.

Harry ignored the threat as the Headmaster had left himself wide open with that. "If you think it necessary, sir, please do so. However, did you ask Mrs. Weasley if it was acceptable to her that her only daughter would be used as 'bait' in the second task? That she would be left unconscious under a lake? Or for that matter, did you ask Ginny if she would help out with the second task before you or Professor McGonagall came to take her away?"

"That does not matter, Mr. Potter."

A quick glance showed the Headmaster's eyes were distant, and Harry knew he was walking a thin line.

"If you mention Ginny not being in her dorm room last night, then I hope you mention your plans for her at the same time. I would hate to have to tell her that myself. I'm curious to know which Mrs. Weasley

would feel was the least safe for her daughter."

Albus Dumbledore said nothing, but Harry could feel his eyes on him. The silence was a long, awkward moment as far as Harry was concerned. "You've changed a great deal this year, Mr. Potter. I am unsure if it is for the better."

Harry shrugged. "I've had to start growing up this year, the Tournament forced that. I'm not sure I like it either, but what is done is done. I can't change this, just like you can't change some of the things you've done. Of course, I do realize that I've still a way to go before being an adult by any means."

"And what have I done that's so bad, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore's tone was all curiosity, which made Harry think the man was confused as to what had triggered all this.

Harry was still was not looking him in the eye, so it was hard to get a read on the Headmaster's true emotions, but he hoped the man could tell he had been mostly honest.

"Perhaps it's just my not understanding, Headmaster, but I thought the school was supposed to be a safe place." He risked another quick glance and saw Dumbledore frown, so he rushed on. "Oh, I know accidents can happen, especially as we're all learning new spells, but I mean beyond that. Here there seems to be a lot of life-threatening things, things that come to find me at school and not even you or your staff can stop them. Something has happened to me every year, including this one, and I can't say much of it has been good."

"I see," the Headmaster said slowly.

After waiting for some reaction, Harry could feel his stomach growing irritated over the lack of sustenance. "If I may, Headmaster, I'd like to get something more to eat before I have to leave."

"Certainly, Mr. Potter. You should have about ten more minutes." As Harry turned to leave, he heard the Headmaster's voice and stopped.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, Mr. Potter, but please see Professor McGonagall for a week of detentions for your actions last night."

Now Harry looked right at him and intensely stared. "If Ginny had been in her dorm when you went to Gryffindor Tower last night, would you have taken her with you and returned Neville?" As the Headmaster started to answer, Harry added, "Honestly, sir, would you have?"

Dumbledore held Harry's gaze, and within seconds he felt that soul-reading gaze understood him better than he understood himself. "Yes, I would have, Mr. Potter. She was picked by the committee, and was the only one that fit the criteria."

"Then my detentions will be worth it." Harry turned and left, knowing that the Headmaster would be contemplating how Harry Potter was changing. At fourteen, Harry was slowly adapting to the situation he was forced into, and finally was actively trying to become a force to be reckoned with. While Harry was sure his new behavior was exasperating to some, he hoped that people like the Headmaster would also understand, and give him the chance to grow as he needed to. If they would only give Harry a little direction and then get out of his way, Harry was sure he could start to become what so many people seemed to expect him to be. That was something to think about, but for now, he had a challenge to beat since his good friend Neville Longbottom was counting on him.

Harry stood at the edge of the lake feeling very nervous. His newfound good friend was below the water waiting on him. Looking at his three competitors, he drew some comfort from their equally nervous looks.

They were about to start the second task, so he pulled off his robes and about froze in the cold February wind as Bagman started announcing the task for today. Harry wanted to find whatever idiot had planned for them to go swimming in the winter and have a loud and pointed discussion. He guessed Bagman must have been the one, given how the man was almost gleeful in the brisk climate. Looking down, he saw his wand holster strapped to his right calf, and a knife holster strapped to his left calf. Both holsters held their respective implements. Reaching into the pocket of his swimsuit, he

pulled out a bag of what looked like a bunch of rat-tails. When Bagman started counting down, Harry started chewing the disgusting mass.

As Bagman yelled go, Harry started rushing out into the icy water. By the time the water was to his shoulders, he found it difficult to breathe, so he went under and took a deep breath of water. He was so glad he had already done this once before in the large prefect's bathtub at Neville and Hermione's urging. Fred and George had given him the password when he had asked, although how those two knew it, Harry did not know and decided it was best not to ask. Keeping just under the surface of the water, Harry started swimming towards the middle of the lake as fast as he could. By staying near the surface, it was easy for him to stick his head up and get his bearings. Staying near the top of the water also kept him away from the Grindylows, who he had been warned inhabited the murky depths.

When he thought he was near the center of the lake, he started diving straight down. He found the Merpeople's village quite easily using the directions he had been provided. He made a mental note to thank Myrtle for this tip later, once the task was over and he had time to warm up. Once there, it was easy find the four captives, they were held in place with ropes. He quickly freed Neville, but when he tried to free the others, the Merpeople prevented him. Understanding that he would be interfering with the others' work, he grabbed Neville and took him up. Once Neville broke the surface of the water, he gasped and started breathing.

Neville gave him a huge smile as he gulped down air. Harry smiled at him and grabbed Neville's hands, placing them on his shoulders. Neville understood and held on as Harry started swimming just under the surface of the water so Neville could keep his head out of the water. They made it back to the shore of the lake before even half the hour allotted to the task was over. While Harry had to stay underwater until the Gillyweed wore off, he could hear the cheering as well as see Hermione and Ginny jumping up and down for joy at him being done, though everything was distorted.

While Harry was sitting in water only a few feet deep, Fleur came up out of the lake sobbing. Sticking an ear out, Harry realized that she

was very upset because she could not complete the task and was afraid for her "zi'ter". Without another moment's thought, Harry turned and began swimming furiously back towards where the hostages were. This time, he knew exactly where to dive.

He could hear the Merpeople singing about time being almost gone and how what the champions sought would be left there to rot. When he arrived, he saw only one person left waiting: Fleur's little sister. Hoping to speed things up, Harry pulled his wand and shot a cutting curse at the rope holding the petite blonde. The Merpeople were not happy with that and started to come towards him. With a smile, he let out another bubble of air as he cast, "Accio girl!" The little blonde headed girl came zipping to him, and grabbing her hand, he swam towards the surface.

As Neville had, the little Delacour also started gasping for air as she crested the surface, which woke her up. Unlike Neville, however, she clung to Harry for dear life, which made things awkward between his need to be underwater and her blatant fear of being in the water. With a smile and much gesturing, he finally convinced her to put her hands on his shoulders and swam back to shore. When they were only about a hundred yards from shore, he felt his gills start to fade, which made him surface abruptly. Taking a moment to reassure the girl that everything was OK, the two of them had to swim normally the rest of the way.

Once he arrived at the shore, Fleur made much about his bravery and even hugged him before Ginny could get to him. As Fleur gave him the French double kiss, one of the kisses missed his cheek and Harry got a kiss from the partial Veela right on the lips. Fleur either did not realize it or did not care as she was back with her sister, hugging her and crying at being reunited.

Ginny walked up to him and offered him a blanket. "Do I have anything to be concerned about Harry?" she asked in a far too casual tone.

Harry was not fooled. "Uh, you mean about Fleur's, err, mistake? No, nothing at all, it was quite distasteful really, simply horrible, unpleasant, I can't believe she..." Harry was interrupted by Ginny

flinging herself on him and kissing him firmly right there in front of everyone.

As she let him go, she smiled. "I'm only teasing you, Harry, and I'm not bothered by the fact that a distraught witch can't aim a kiss, but don't you go chasing after another witch either," she told him playfully, enjoying the moment, yet certain he had received her message.

"Never," he told her with a smile.

Madam Pomfrey made her appearance. "Here, drink this, Mr. Potter, it will help warm you up." Harry found that she was not kidding, as smoke came out of his ears almost immediately after drinking the potion.

He and all of his friends gave a yell of triumph when the points were awarded. As Harry had the fastest time to retrieve a hostage, and then he went back and rescued Gabrielle Delacour before the time was up, even Karkaroff had a hard time taking off points. Harry thought that may have had something to do with Krum arriving one minute late. Harry was solidly in first place and, most importantly, everyone was safe.

(Mon 27 Feb)

While the foursome were eating breakfast, Professor McGonagall came by their seats. "Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, I will expect you both in my classroom at seven this evening sharp. Bring your book bags with you, please, along with your pending assignments." She went on to her normal place at the head table.

All four of them sighed. "I was hoping they had forgotten," Ginny said as she grabbed some more bacon.

"You really thought Professor McGonagall was going to forget you broke the rules?" Hermione asked with a note of incredulousness.

"I had hoped she understood our reasons," Harry said, "but I guess since Professor Dumbledore said we were to have detention, she has to do it." He sighed.

Ginny smiled. "At least it's with her and not Snape, and we get to do detention together. Always look for a bright side, Harry." He laughed and bumped her shoulder slightly to play with her, but she only winked back at him.

Hermione flipped through her Daily Prophet one more time. "It's very strange, but I don't see an article in here by Rita Skeeter, and I haven't seen anything by her since shortly after the first task. Surely she wouldn't pass up this chance to write something about the Tournament now that another task has been completed."

"Don't know and don't care," Harry told her. "I'm really happy not to see anything by her. Maybe she hacked someone off and they threatened her enough that she's stopped writing for a while."

"I would buy that person a Butterbeer," Ginny joked.

"You and me both," but Harry was not joking.

At seven o'clock sharp, Harry and Ginny were in Professor McGonagall's classroom, their book bags in hand, which they thought was pretty unusual. They could only guess how many lines they were going to have to write. Professor McGonagall was sitting behind her desk grading papers. "Close the door and sit down," she instructed them. They sat on the front row and looked at her. "Do you both know why you are here?" They both nodded. "Very well then. Please pull out your homework and get started. I know you both have Transfiguration essays due soon. Please start with those."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other with a puzzled look. Harry decided that perhaps they did not know why they were there after all, but he was not about to cause a problem by asking. Instead, he would take advantage of the gift being handed them. Ginny seemed to silently agree with him as they both pulled out their homework and began.

At ten minutes before ten, Professor McGonagall looked up at them. "You should immediately return to Gryffindor Tower, you have ten minutes before curfew. I will see you here again every night this week at seven. Don't forget your book bags."

Harry and Ginny gathered their papers, got up and left quietly.

Arriving back in the Tower, Harry saw Hermione and Neville sitting at a table doing their homework. Looking up, Neville asked, "What did you have to do, lines?"

Ginny smirked after sharing a glance with Harry. "No, we had to do our homework. We even turned in our Transfiguration work early since we completed it. I almost finished my Potions homework too. Strangely, I think all week is going to be like this."

"It's really weird," Harry agreed, happy to have a detention that, for once, did not leave him exhausted, nearly dead, or covered in filth.

Hermione tilted her head and looked at both of them. "I think this is Professor McGonagall's way of punishing you when she thinks you shouldn't be punished."

Harry exchanged surprised looks with Ginny and Neville before Neville smiled broadly. Harry's friend was the first to speak their agreement out loud. "That was really insightful, Hermione."

"Thanks, Neville," she beamed. Harry and Ginny sat down with the other two to finish what little work they had left for the evening.

None of the four noticed a red-haired boy sitting in a chair by the fire reading a Quidditch magazine when he was not watching them. The boy wished that he too was sitting at that table, but he realized that was not possible now. While a small part of him wondered if it could happen in the future, he looked back down at the magazine and continued reading -- it was the easiest thing to do.

(Sat 18 Mar)

The foursome left for their day in Hogsmeade. They walked as a pair of couples. Even though Neville and Hermione were not holding hands like Harry and Ginny were, it was still obvious that Neville and Hermione were together in more than just casual friendship.

"Look at them," Ginny whispered to Harry as they walked a little behind the other couple. "The glances are there, the occasional

touches on the arm, the way he blushes and then says something to make her blush."

"Are you saying they're about to get together for real?"

"Duh," she joked with him. "The only question is how long it will take."

"You know, I've noticed that Neville is doing a lot better in class too, and I don't mean just on grades. He answers questions more easily, and when he has to do a spell in class, he gets it right a good bit faster than he used to," Harry commented.

"She's good for him. And you know, I think that maybe he's good for her. When he figures out what he wants, he can go after it, but most of the time he's a pretty easy-going guy. I think that's what she needs."

"Yeah, I can see that. I think you're right." Harry thought about that for a moment before he had another thought. "You know, they get along much better than she and Ron did, though I thought Ron was of similar temperament. Well, similar when it came to being easy-going."

Ginny snuggled up to him a bit, which made Harry smile at her. "Of course I'm right. You know, I used to think Ron fancied Hermione. These days, I'm starting to wonder, since he doesn't seem to anymore." She blew out a long breath and then turned a pained smile to him. "I think Neville is better for her than my brother, though," Ginny admitted.

Harry considered that as they walked on, watching Neville and Hermione rub shoulders or elbows and talk quietly to each other. "Ron never told me, but I think he did fancy her. I don't know about now, though." Harry squeezed Ginny's shoulders as he moved his arm around her. "I think he did something earlier in the year that made her really angry, and when she stopped helping him with his homework, he took that as being personally rejected."

Ginny gave him a playful tap on his chest. "Wow, Harry, that was insightful."

"What? You don't think I'm capable of insight?" He lowered his arm from around her shoulders to her waist and started tickling her.

"Har-ry!" she shrieked and tried to get away, but he held on, tickling her mercilessly.

Their friends turned around from up ahead. "Are we going to have to separate you two?" Hermione called with a teasing tone in her voice.

Harry desisted his tickle attack on his girlfriend. "You want to stick together or separate and meet for lunch later?"

Hermione glanced at Neville and saw him with a shy smile. "How about we split and meet for lunch?"

"OK, sounds good," Harry agreed. "Meet at the Three Broomsticks about noon? That should give us enough time to meet Snuffles later." Sirius had written him, asking for a meeting with his friends. Harry hoped his godfather had some new information for them, but either way it would be good to see him again.

As they walked around the village, eventually Harry realized that Ginny kept steering them into little knick-knack shops. As they were in the third one, he whispered to her, "Looking for anything in particular?"

She gave him an impish grin. "Actually, yes. I'll let you know when I find it."

Harry wanted to ask more, but he had learned what that look meant as well as how stubborn she could be at times. He decided to let it go and simply enjoy their time together. They easily bantered about the items they saw, and Ginny also threw in the occasional story about her family when she saw something that reminded her of some momentous event.

When they were walking towards the door, Ginny looked in the display case under the counter and Harry thought she finally saw what she was looking for. The shop owner had casually watched them, as they were the only ones in the store at the moment, but he

seemed to become alert as Ginny stopped dead in her tracks in front of a small display.

"Harry," she whispered, "if I got you one of those necklaces, would you wear it?"

Surprised by the question, he looked into the case where she pointed. "You mean one of those simple bronze ones?" She nodded. He looked again. It was merely a circle of bronze, not too unlike a Knut, on a leather cord. "I guess, but why?"

She looked at the shop keeper. "These bronze necklaces, are they magical?"

The older man came over and pulled them out. "No, Miss, they're just bronze. My son makes them and I sell them for him. They're one Sickle each." Harry assumed that the man's son had made these from leftover scraps, so that was why they were so inexpensive.

"Great, I'll take two." Ginny dug into her pocket and pulled out two Sickles.

"Thank you Miss, come back again. My son is always making something different," the shop keeper told the young couple as they left.

Ginny put both necklaces in her pocket and as they went back out into the street. Ginny began herding Harry toward Zonko's which was nearby, so he kept his questions to himself for the moment and followed her as they looked at what was new.

After a few moments in the shop, though, Harry could not stand it any more. "So are you going to tell me why you bought those, especially since you asked me if I'd wear one?"

She gave him the impish grin again. "They're for us and I'll explain later. Trust me, Harry."

He did trust her, but he was also curious. "Does this have anything to do with the extra time you've been spending in the library?" They both

spent a lot of time studying together since Christmas, but she had been spending a little extra time in the library over the last couple of weeks doing some sort of research.

The impish grin returned. "My, aren't you the clever one?" She laughed as he rolled his eyes at her. "Be patient, Harry. I promise I'll explain later."

After lunch, Harry led the four friends to the end of the road heading to the hills behind Hogsmeade and found Snuffles lying by a stile into a field. He crossed over, making sure they were following, and followed Sirius up to the nearest hill. In a secluded place, he transformed back into his human form. Harry noticed he was still in his old dirty prison clothes, which Harry planned to do something about. There were higher priorities at the moment though, so he pulled a sack of food out of his backpack and handed the bulging bag over to his godfather. He had brought a lot from the kitchens with Dobby's help, and his godfather quickly started eating.

"Want to introduce me to your friends, Harry?" Sirius was managing to talk between bites, which gave Harry hope that he was getting at least some food while on the run. "Though I already know the smartest witch here," his godfather said with a charming smile. "It's good to see you again, Hermione."

"It's good to see you too, Snuffles." Harry saw Neville look at Hermione with a bit of surprise. They had told Neville and Ginny the story of last year's escapades shortly before the first task, but Harry thought they both had a hard time believing it entirely. "Sirius, this is my friend, Neville Longbottom," Hermione said, pulling Neville next to her by gripping his hand.

"Longbottom? You would be Frank and Alice's boy then," Sirius said as he finished off one chicken leg, tossed it absently over his shoulder, and pulled out another. "Good people, you should be proud of them, Neville."

"That's what my Gran says," he said quietly.

"And she's right." Sirius paused to consume almost half of the drumstick in his hand. "You remind me of your father. He was a good wizard, very kind too. I bet you'll go far one day." Neville looked up and stood a little straighter at those words. Sirius looked to the last person as he tossed another leg bone over his shoulder. "You're a new one, and a pretty one too." Harry wanted to smack his godfather for the smirk on his face, but instead found himself blushing as Sirius continued. "Harry, you've got the eye of your father. Who's this holding your hand?"

Harry saw that Ginny blushed just as much as he did. He really needed to find a way to get back at Sirius for those comments. "This is Ginny, Ginny Weasley. She's been a great friend to me this year."

Sirius tossed a third chicken bone and pulled out an apple. "Hmm, sounds like a story I'd like to hear," he said with a smile. "Hopefully, we'll have time later. Now, tell me what's been happening."

The five of them spent a good bit of the remaining afternoon talking about recent events, both at Hogwarts and further away. Harry was a little frustrated at the end, because he did not feel that he had learned much in the way of new information. Even the news about Barty Crouch Sr. and Jr., while interesting, did not seem that useful. Nevertheless, he enjoyed the time with his godfather.

At the end, Harry did receive some advice.

"Harry, what are you doing to prepare for the final task?" Sirius asked.

"Uh, well, we're getting together for an hour or so each week to learn spells, practice them, some dueling, that sort of thing. We were doing more before the first task, but we slowed down as the second task didn't require much of that," Harry admitted.

"Right. That's a good start, but it's not going to cut it. I'd be willing to bet this last task will take more effort." Sirius paused to root around and pull out a meat pie. "I want you to do that sort of thing for at least three hours a week. You've got, what, three months to get ready? And you're competing against seventh year students, so you need to really work at it. You've got to be able to keep up and be ready to handle

whatever else gets thrown at you. If you need help to know what spells to learn, either talk to Moody or Flitwick."

"Flitwick?" Harry asked in surprise.

Sirius had to finish swallowing before he could continue. "Yeah, he was a pretty good dueler in his day. Of course, Moody was an Auror and knows all the spells that are useful on a daily basis when protecting yourself. Since I can't be there to help you, that's about the best I can do. Sorry, Harry, I wish I could train you myself" Sirius told him before he resumed eating his way through the pile of food.

"That's OK, I still appreciate the advice. By the way, what size clothes do you wear? That's something I can help you with." Harry watched his godfather take a breath, and by his expression, he knew what Sirius was about to say. "Tell me, I can help you at least this way."

Sirius deflated visibly. After a moment he told Harry what size clothes he wore and then pulled the boy into a hug. "Thank you, Harry. We'll be together someday and I'll take care of you then like I should. I promise."

As they said their good-byes, Sirius had one last word. "You three start back slowly, I want a quick word with Ginny." Harry gave his godfather a strange look, but Sirius pointed towards Hogsmeade. "Go on, she'll join you in a moment, Harry. She'll be fine."

The others left and Ginny looked at the ex-convict, not sure what this was about.

"Ginny, you're really his girlfriend, right?" She nodded. Sirius scooped up the rest of the food and placed it back into the bag to take with him. "All right, you have a special task in Harry's training. I haven't known him as long as I wished, but I can tell that he can get really down from time to time. So your job, as I see it, is to look after him and make sure he keeps his spirits up. Don't let him dwell on the bad stuff, make sure he keeps his sights set on the goal. Can you do that?"

Ginny smiled, as she knew that what Sirius wanted was the same thing that she wanted. "Yes, I think I can do that."

"Good. I've met your dad once, good wizard, so I suspect you're a pretty good witch. Help Harry, and don't be afraid to use a broom closet to remind him of the good parts of life if he gets really down," he told her with a smirk. Ginny blushed furiously at the blunt statement, but she also knew that Harry was already a fan of that type of therapy. "Run along now. It was nice to meet you Ginny."

"Bye, Sirius. I'm glad we got to meet. I promise I'll take good care of Harry." She gave the man a quick hug despite his wide smirk, and then ran after Harry. He was waiting not too far away, though their friends had continued to walk slowly into town. They were close enough that it would not be hard to catch up with them.

"What did he want?" Harry asked, his face curious and slightly worried.

Ginny took his hand in hers, and guided him to follow Neville and Hermione.

"He just wanted to make sure I'd take care of you," she told him shyly. At his questioning look, she added slyly, "He said I should use a broom closet if I needed to." She started laughing at his expression and the cute blush on his face. "I didn't tell him we already tried that once or twice."

All too soon, in Ginny's opinion, the foursome was back at the castle.

Searching around the tower, Harry found some catalogs with men's clothing. A short while later, with a lot of input on appropriate attire from Ginny, she helped him fill out an order form for three changes of clothing that were in Sirius's size. It cost a little extra, but Harry was happy to have Hedwig take the order in, and then take the shrunken and lightened packages to Snuffles.

(Sat 1 Apr)

The morning had started off with a laugh. Much to Harry's amusement, Ron had come to breakfast with short and spiky black hair, which did not go back to normal until nearly the end of the meal. Fred and George had been nearby with clipboards in hand, glancing

at their watches, and making notes. Ron was slowly paying for his earlier transgressions by being a test subject for the twins; he was also hindered by the fact that he was normally a very sound sleeper.

Ron's unusual looks drew snickers whenever the twins pranked him, which normally occurred on weekend mornings. Even Hermione found it amusing, although she also normally tried to hide her amusement. The normally straight-laced student had completely lost it the morning Ron sprouted feathers all over his head during breakfast when he drank his juice. Ginny's favorite had been the day he had instantly grown hair all over his face and the back of his hands. Several students had howled at Werewolf-Ron before he ran from the Great Hall.

The Gryffindors had just finished having a small impromptu party in the Tower for the twins seventeenth birthday that evening. Most of the students had had a great time, especially when the twins had pulled out some of their joke products. The Canary Cremes had been the biggest hit.

The quartet left the Tower and headed to the Charms classroom, as Harry led them to their next round of practice. Once they had approached Professor Flitwick about a list of spells that Harry should learn, the short teacher had also volunteered his classroom. With his list of spells and a similar list from Professor Moody, Hermione kept the little group busy learning the new spells and practicing whenever they had free time.

All four of them were doing well, but Harry was doing the best, somewhat to the disappointment of Hermione as she tried to keep up. Harry thought she did well hiding her disappointment, and hoped she tried to keep it all in perspective as she knew he was the one that had to do the best. However, she was openly amazed at his power at times, and Harry had to sheepishly admit to the others that he was surprised as well.

As they finished up for the evening, Ginny looked at the others and asked, "Do you mind going back on your own? Harry and I need to discuss something."

Hermione smiled and nodded, while Neville and Harry looked at each other bewildered. Ignoring the obvious surprise, Hermione grabbed Neville's hand and pulled him out the door, closing it behind them. Harry turned to Ginny for information, but she kept her eyes on the door.

When the door finally closed, Ginny reached into her pocket and pulled out the necklaces she had purchased a couple of weeks ago. Looking at one closely, she held the other out to Harry. "Will you wear this? Please, for me?"

He was surprised to see the necklaces again. When Ginny had failed to bring them out or discuss them, he had pushed his questions aside and decided that she would tell him what she was up to when she was ready. "If you want me to. Are you going to tell me about them now?"

She smiled and nodded. Taking the necklace back from him, she stood closely and started tying it around his neck. "I've put a special charm on these, Harry, and we can use them to communicate with each other if we need to. As long as the bronze part is touching your skin, whether it's your neck or you're touching it with your fingers, you can say 'Guinevere', as in King Arthur's wife, and that will turn it on."

"Err, Guinevere?"

Ginny smiled softly. "You didn't know? That's the English form of my name, but mine is the Italian one you won't normally use. 'Good-bye Guinevere' will turn it off."

Ginny stepped back and started tying hers around her neck. "When it's on, anything you say or whatever you hear around you will be sent to my necklace so I can hear it too."

"Why?" he asked.

Tenderly, she told him, "It's so that if something happens, you can tell me what's wrong and where you are so I can either come help or send help. You remember saying you didn't want anything to happen

to me, that you wanted me to be safe?" He nodded. "I want you to be safe too, Harry. I don't want to lose you."

"Does yours do that too, or does it only receive?"

"Mine can contact yours too, Harry," she explained. "So if I get into trouble, I can call you." With a grin, she also told him, "If you'll put a silencing charm around your bed, we can talk at night too."

"I like that idea," he told her as he closed the gap between them and pulled her close. They kissed slowly and gently at first, before it started to become more passionate.

As Harry broke the kiss and started nibbling on her neck, Ginny groaned, "Harry, I think we need to go back."

"Do you really want to stop?" he asked her as he nibbled on her ear, giving her the shivers.

"No, but I know it's getting near curfew and I don't want to spend time in detention when we could be doing this some other evening."

He reluctantly pulled back. "I do so like how you think," he told her with a grin. "Let's see if we can find an empty corner in the Common Room. I don't think I've held you in my lap recently." With a shared smile, they left and made it back just in time.

As they found an empty corner of the room, Harry nudged Ginny and gestured toward their other two friends. Neville had a look of surprise on his face, as he held in his two hands one of Hermione's, who was busy using the other to turn pages in a book.

(Fri 26 May)

Professor McGonagall held Harry back at the end of Transfiguration class. "Mr. Potter, you are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock. Mr. Bagman will explain the third task to the champions at that time."

That evening, when he saw the maze growing in the Quidditch pitch, like Cedric, he was indignant. When he was told that Hagrid would be supplying the monsters that would be some of the obstacles, his indignation was replaced with naked fear. Only Cedric seemed to understand that the Hogwarts groundskeeper had a different notion of 'friendly' than anyone else, and it was clear that the older boy joined him in worry.

After Harry had returned to his Common Room and told his friends about the third task, Neville joined him in worry and speculation, while Hermione started revising the list of spells he still had yet to learn. Ginny just looked at him and lightly fingered her necklace. He nodded at their sign to each other to talk once they got to bed. Harry needed to talk to her and hear her comforting words.

From across the room, Ron Weasley was playing chess with a seventh year. He watched the foursome with their heads together quietly discussing something. Ron sighed as he wished once again that he could be a part of that group, while realizing he had blown his opportunity. He still did not think he was totally wrong, but Ron wondered what Harry would do if he fully apologized, including for not believing his friend about how his friend's name got into the Goblet of Fire. His opponent moved his rook threatening Ron's bishop. He'd have to think about that, and talk about Harry at his next session with Madam Pomfrey.

(A/N: A few people have pointed out in reviews that Ginny and Neville seem to magically know about Sirius when they obviously did not at the end of book3. All I can say is "Oops!" :/ Please assume that Harry and Hermione told them about their adventures from last year somewhere "off camera" during chapter 1 of this story. -- kb)

Chapter 5: Third Time's the Charm

(Sat 24 Jun)

The question Harry had as he woke on the day of the third task was how well it all would turn out. He was nervous, and yet through his friends and Sirius, he had learned about fighting so he felt he was at least reasonably prepared. He had finished learning all the spells in fourth and fifth year DADA and Charms classes, as well as some of the more important ones from sixth and seventh year, though those had been harder to learn.

Ginny had repeatedly expressed her appreciation for learning the spells with him, as it helped her with her goal for the year. As much as he liked her goal, it had also caused her to spend a lot of time in the library; therefore, he had spent a lot of his extra time in the library too.

Harry was not the only one anticipating the third task, for it was apparent that everyone in the school was excited, including the visiting students. Though the two visiting groups of students were not competing directly, but merely cheering on their school's champion, their good cheer was infectious. As he rose to get dressed, he finally decided that the best thing about the third task was that the bloody Tournament would be over, and he could try to be normal again soon.

At breakfast, the Great Hall was abuzz with speculation about the task. The morning Daily Prophet even talked about it, though it was a bit boring for the students who were living in the castle from what Harry overheard.

"You know," Hermione said thoughtfully as she spread jam on her toast, "it's interesting that there haven't been any Rita Skeeter articles since before Christmas. I would think she would have written something by now."

"I'm not complaining," Harry said with gusto, having been a target of hers during the early part of the Tournament.

"Are you going to read about more hexes during your exams today?" Ginny asked him. It had been his strategy since he had been excused from final exams as a Tournament Champion, something which Snape had verbally given him grief about.

"Yeah, seems best," he said as he pushed some of his food around his plate. His nerves were starting to get more pronounced as the morning continued.

"Mr. Potter?" He turned and saw Professor McGonagall standing behind him, and was slightly surprised at her silent approach. "All the champions are meeting in the trophy room off the Hall after breakfast."

"But, but the task isn't until tonight..." he started to panic.

"I'm aware of that," she told him calmly. "Your families are here. This is your chance to greet them, and perhaps show them around the school before tonight." As he stared dumfounded at her, she gave him a faint smile before she turned and left.

Harry was horrified of the idea that the Dursleys might be here. He knew they wanted no part of the Wizarding world. After almost spilling his pumpkin juice as he got up, he started to walk away to see who waited for him. Before he had taken even two steps, he heard a throat clearing behind him, and he turned back only to find Ginny glaring at him. Rushing back, he started to apologize profusely. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. I'm starting to get more and more nervous."

She stood and put her arms around his neck pulling him close to her. "I understand, Harry. It's just that you didn't give me a chance to say good luck, and that I know you'll do well. Do promise me one thing, though."

"What?"

"Keep yourself safe. I don't care if you win or not, I just want you in one piece afterwards, OK?"

Harry hugged her tightly. "Thanks, Gin. I'll do my best to stay in one piece, too."

"I love you, Harry. Now, go have a nice day and I'll see you again at dinner -- maybe at lunch too." She kissed him openly, obviously not caring who saw them, including her brothers.

Harry felt much better as he walked toward the room McGonagall had directed him to. In the trophy room, he was unsurprised when he saw Cedric's parents, Viktor's parents and little brother, as well as Fleur's mother and her little sister, who waved at him with a big smile on her young face. With a nervous smile, he waved back for a moment, before he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill, who started walking over to him.

"Harry, how are you?" Ginny's mother gave him a very firm hug. "I hope you don't mind us being your honorary parents for today. Professor Dumbledore thought you'd like to have some family here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley." Harry happily smiled at her and Ginny's brother. "When Professor McGonagall said my family was here, I was afraid the Dursleys had come."

The red-haired matron frowned at his comment, but Harry could see she also managed to somehow bite her tongue on whatever she was tempted to say.

"How are you feeling about tonight, Harry?" Bill spoke up and shook his hand.

"Nervous..."

Bill smiled, and clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "I can understand that, but Charlie said you were incredible against the dragon, so I wouldn't worry too much if I were you." Harry appreciated the show of confidence.

"Harry, why don't you show us around the school. It's been a while since we've been here," Mrs. Weasley suggested. Harry happily complied, and all three had an enjoyable morning, Mrs. Weasley and Bill alternately telling stories as they walked about the castle.

At lunch, the rest of the Weasleys were surprised when Harry walked into the Great Hall with two of their family in tow. "Mum!" Ginny cried when she saw her mother and ran to her for a hug. After the hug from her mother, Ginny turned to Harry and put an arm around his waist.

"Is he treating you right?" her mother asked with a smile, and Harry suspected she already knew the answer.

"Of course, I've got him wrapped around my little finger," she replied with her impish grin. Harry just looked down and blushed, while everyone else laughed.

"Mum?" Turning around, they saw Ron.

"Ron, how are you doing?" she asked him as she walked over and gave her youngest son a hug.

"Fine, mum." As everyone was about to sit for lunch, Ron looked at Harry. "D'you mind if I join you?" he asked, and it was clear that he was expecting a negative response.

"Go ahead, Ron," Harry told him politely. "You should join your family." It was the least he could do for Mrs. Weasley, and she beamed at him while Ron sat on the end next to Bill. The twins drifted over when they came in for lunch, and seized upon the opportunity to ham it up.

The lunch was so pleasant Harry would have sworn they were at The Burrow. He completely forgot about the task that was scheduled for that evening, until everyone left to go his or her separate ways for the afternoon.

The afternoon was spent much like the morning, walking around and telling stories. He was almost comfortable again until the Feast that night. During the Feast, only Ginny's hand holding his under the table helped him manage his growing nervousness.

When Dumbledore announced the third task would be starting soon, and thus the champions should make their way to the Quidditch pitch,

Harry's imagination about his failing dramatically in public kicked into overdrive.

Ginny again stood up with him and gave him a hug like she had at breakfast. In his ear she told him, "Just do your best and be safe, Harry. All that matters to me is that you're safe. If something goes wrong, don't forget to use your necklace to call me. I'll get you help."

"Right, my necklace," he whispered back to her. As he left, he exclaimed to himself, "Damn! I think I've forgotten half the spells I've memorized." His friends barely contained their chuckles, not wanting to make him more nervous.

The champions gathered at the entrance to the maze and listened to Ludo Bagman explain that the trophy was in the center of the maze, and the first one to get past whatever obstacles they ran into and reached the trophy would be the winner. Since he was ahead in points, Harry would get to go in first.

Harry stood in front of the maze taking deep breaths, while at the same time trying not to hyperventilate. A small part of his mind told him this was no big deal, he had done well in the first two tasks. He did not even have to win, just make a decent showing. But the rest of his mind thought about the things he might find in there, creatures that Hagrid found fun.

Harry barely paid attention to the stands behind the champions, which were filling while the preparations were underway. His attention was instead on Albus Dumbledore, and Harry thought the man looked at the four students with pride for each of them, even the two that were not from his school. Harry thought that the headmaster might even be proud of Harry, which was slightly surprising considering their last confrontation. He thought that just maybe, since the night after the second task, the Headmaster had purposefully tried to not interfere with Harry. There had been odd bits of help from some of the staff, and Harry wondered if Dumbledore had encouraged McGonagall, Flitwick, and Moody to help him out in little ways. In addition, late one night not too long ago after an evening of training, Harry had passed the Headmaster in the hallway and the old man had smiled at him. Regardless of how it had happened or who

encouraged it, the help had been in ways that made Harry happier and let him deal with life on a more even keel. Harry knew he was certainly better trained now.

As Bagman was about to start the task, Harry turned away from contemplating the headmaster and looked up into the stands. The small sea of redheads was easy to find, and he saw his favorite redhead waving at him. When she saw him looking, she blew him a kiss, and he was able to feel his smile in response to her encouragement.

"Get Ready! Three," Bagman shouted with a magically amplified voice, "two, one, go!" Harry took off in a flat run, knowing that Cedric would be following him soon.

Harry was surprised at how easy it was initially, then he started finding obstacles. One after another he conquered, even a sphinx of all things. He wondered briefly where Hagrid had found one of those after he was safely past it.

Suddenly, he saw the trophy and ran for it, and straight into a giant spider -- obviously one of Aragog's children. Cedric was running for the trophy and apparently had not seen the spider. "Cedric, look out!" Harry shot a Stunning spell at the acromantula. That failed to bring it down, but it gave Cedric the split-second he needed to avoid getting trampled or bitten by the monster.

Unfortunately for Harry, the Stunning spell angered the spider and it ignored Cedric, focusing only on Harry. Before he knew what was happening, the spider had Harry's left leg in its pincers. A hasty Expelliarmus made the spider drop him, but that just hurt his already injured leg even more.

By the time Harry looked up from the ground, Cedric had started fighting the spider as well. Together, they managed two simultaneous stunning spells that finally took the spider down.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Diggory asked. Harry was surprised for a moment at the concern his fellow competitor was showing, but then

he realized it matched everything Harry knew about the seventh year Hufflepuff.

"It's just my leg, but I'll live. Go on, Cedric, grab the trophy -- you deserve it."

Cedric looked at Harry and shook his head. "No, I think you deserve it more. I probably could get there first, but only because of your leg. You saved me from that thing, though. You could have let the spider attack me and made it there first." Cedric's face scrunched up briefly into a frown. "You take it, Harry."

"If I continued to try to convince you to take it, you wouldn't take it, would you?" Harry asked, surprised anew for different reasons. Cedric earned Harry's respect several times over by his gesture.

"No, I won't. You deserve it more," Cedric told him seriously. "Look at you, Harry. Look how well you've done, and you're only a fourth year. You're amazing. I don't think you put your name in the Goblet anymore, but I think that if you had been allowed to, I think the Goblet would have picked you over me."

"So what are we going to do since neither one of us wants to win it? Take it together?" Harry half jested.

Diggory grinned. "Why not? That keeps it a Hogwarts victory, and I can live with that. How about you?"

"Sure, if it allows me to get my leg healed faster," he grinned back.

"Here, let me help you." Cedric grabbed Harry's arm and wrapped it around his shoulder so Harry could lean on him the rest of the way. Once they were at the cup, Cedric said, "Grab it on three, then, and let's end this thing."

"Great idea. One," Harry started counting, "two, three!" They both grabbed a handle, then they both felt the jerking behind their navel, just like a Portkey.

When the two boys landed, they looked around and saw nothing familiar. It appeared they were in a graveyard.

"Is this another part of the task?" Cedric asked, the surprise Harry felt evident in the older boy's voice.

"Don't know." Then Harry saw someone walking toward them. "Oh, Guinevere!" he said, like some people said, "Oh, Merlin!" This seemed like an emergency to Harry. "Who's there?" Before he got an answer, his scar seemed to explode in pain, momentarily immobilizing him.

A high pitched voice said, "Kill the spare."

The figure complied and cast, "Avada Kedavra!" Harry heard more than saw Cedric fall down. Forcing his eyes up and more open, he squinted through the pain and saw Cedric lying there face down -- dead.

Before he knew what was happening, Harry felt himself flung through the air until he slammed into a headstone, where he crumpled to the ground. The man came over and with his wand, forced him to a standing position before he shot rope out, and tied Harry's hands to the ornate gravestone behind him. Looking down, Harry saw his wand where he had dropped it, but there was no chance to reach it.

"W-Where am I?" Harry asked, hoping to get some information.

The man set a bundle down on the ground and began working with a large cauldron. "You are near my master's house." The fire under the cauldron was lit and seemed to radiate an intense heat much faster than a normal fire should.

"I'm in the graveyard of your master's house? But who?" He hoped desperately that Ginny was listening, and that the necklace charm she had placed would work over the great distances he believed between their location and Hogwarts.

"Hurry, Wormtail!" shrieked a high-pitched voice from the little bundle.

With a fresh spike of pain in his scar, Harry suddenly understood.
"Voldemort has a house?"

"Silence!" Wormtail cried and slapped Harry hard across the face.
"Do not speak his name! You are not worthy!" He paused. "You are
not worthy except as way to bring my master's body back."

Turning around, Wormtail pulled a small creature out of the bundle of cloth. Harry was immediately nauseated as he thought the thing looked like nothing more than a hideously deformed baby. Wormtail slowly lowered the thing into the cauldron, and Harry started praying to any deity who would listen for the "thing" to drown.

Wormtail used a spell to add a bone from Voldemort's father, taken from the grave Harry was standing on. Then Wormtail cut off his own hand, which Harry could not watch. Finally recovering after a long moment, with obvious great difficulty, Wormtail advanced on Harry. Scared for what was about to come, Harry knew it was his time to go, and there was not a thing he could do about it. He was too securely tied to the grave monument. In his last moment, he could barely think coherently enough to tell Ginny good-bye.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," he murmured as Wormtail advanced on him with a knife, not considering his words. "I love you. I'm sorry I won't be back." As his father's betrayer raised the knife, Harry squeezed his eyes tightly shut and barely saw a flash of light on the inside of his eyelids.

Ginny wished she could see in the maze to know how Harry was doing. It was so frustrating to her that the maze blocked almost every view into the contest except for the entrance. Her family and friends around her were talking, doing their best to distract one another, but Ginny really wanted them all to shut up so she could worry in peace. She would be immensely pleased when this Tournament was finally over.

Suddenly, she saw a set of red sparks shoot into the air. She wondered if that was Harry or someone else who was calling it quits. A few minutes later, her question was answered as Professor McGonagall brought Fleur Delacour out; the girl was unconscious.

Still she waited. Another ten minutes went by before another set of sparks went up. Professor Flitwick soon brought Viktor Krum out. He was also unconscious. Her Harry was still going, as was Cedric.

Maybe five minutes later, fireworks went up from the middle of the maze and the hedges started to slowly drop as the task was completed.

"Thank goodness it's over!" Ginny exclaimed. The hedges had completely disappeared, revealing a number of spelled areas and creatures who seemed to be trapped in specific locations, when she heard her necklace say, "Who's there?" That was when she realized the table in the middle that should have had the trophy was empty, and neither Harry nor Cedric were to be found in front of them.

Her necklace then spoke in a high-pitched voice. "Kill the spare!" Then she heard the Killing Curse cast. "No!" she shouted and her family started looking at her. She did not care what they thought at that point, all she knew was that her Harry was in danger. Jumping up and running down the stairs, she pushed through the people rising and talking in an excited babble to reach the Headmaster as fast as she could. Just as she arrived near the old wizard, she heard a grunt that sounded a lot like Harry. That only barely reassured her he was still alive.

"Professor! Professor!" she screamed as she ran up to him. "Harry's been taken!"

"Yes, Miss Weasley, I'm aware of that. Please return to your seat while I try to figure out where they went."

Ginny grabbed the sleeve of his robes as he started to turn away. "Professor, if you'll listen, you may be able to know where he is in time to go help. You can hear what Harry hears or says from my necklace."

"What? Precisely what are you telling me?" Dumbledore asked as he looked at her carefully.

"Harry has a necklace that transmits sound from and around him, and he's activated it because he knows he's in trouble. If you'll listen, he might tell you where he is," Ginny explained again, her panic mounting. She needed Dumbledore to help her, immediately, so Harry would come back safely.

Dumbledore ignored everyone else around him who had started asking questions and knelt on one knee beside Ginny so he could hear better. Just then, they heard Harry's voice ask, "W-Where am I?"

A moment later, they heard a man's voice say, "You are near my master's house."

Cornelius Fudge took that moment to walk up and demanded in a loud voice, "Dumbledore, what's going on? Where are they?"

The Headmaster barely heard, "I'm in the graveyard of your master's house? But who?"

"Cornelius, be absolutely quiet, I'm working on it..." Albus quickly chastised the Minister for Magic, ignoring the angry red flush that effused the man's face.

There was a high-pitched noise, but neither Dumbledore or Ginny could make it out. Then they heard Harry plainly say, "Voldemort has a house?"

"What are you doing, Albus?" Cornelius interrupted again. "As Minister for Magic, I demand to know!"

Ginny watched her Headmaster stand up and seem to take on a tangible field of magical power and a stature she had never seen before. She now saw Albus Dumbledore, not as the sometimes genial headmaster, but rather as one of the most powerful wizards in Britain. "Be quiet! Time is of the essence!" He turned to his Deputy. "Minerva, remember our conversation from last night and take precautions." Then he took on a look of concentration as he looked slightly up.

A second later, a flash of light burst above the Headmaster, and as quick as a Seeker, his left hand shot upward just before another flash happened and the old wizard was gone.

As Ginny Weasley was putting all the pieces of the puzzle of her Headmaster together, she heard the voice from her necklace say, "I'm sorry, Ginny. I love you. I'm sorry I won't be back." She was chilled to the bone and the tears she had been holding back burst forth as she sank to her knees, head bowed and buried in her hands. Harry had told her as quickly as he could, but the thought of his death was unbearable.

Minerva McGonagall saw Ginny Weasley fall to her knees and she wanted to comfort the girl, but she had something more important to do. Or two things really, so she needed help -- someone she could trust absolutely with a task while she took control of the chaos in front of her. A head of bushy brunette hair got her attention as it scurried towards Ginny, and she knew she had found her help. "Miss Granger! Come here quickly!"

The young woman paused in mid-step, before she turned and hurried over. "Yes, Professor?"

McGonagall leaned over to whisper to her. "I want you and Mr. Longbottom to keep an eye on Professor Moody without him knowing it. If he tries to leave the area, I want one of you to stun him. We think he may be under the Imperious curse."

The girl's eyes went wide.

"I need you to do this as I'm not entirely sure who I can trust right now. I'll try to get Professor Flitwick to help, but he's trying to keep the crowd at bay. Please keep an eye on him until we have more help ready."

"Yes, Professor." Hardly believing what she had heard, Hermione turned to find Neville, and found him at her side, as usual. That gave her a soft smile and lessened her fears for Ginny and Harry for a moment.

She got him to stand still while she moved slightly so she could watch their Defense teacher over her friend's shoulder. Very quietly, she explained the situation. More of the story was making sense as she thought it through while telling the tale.

The boy's eyes went as wide at the request, just as Hermione's had done. "Are you serious?" he whispered.

Hermione nodded. Looking around to see where everyone was, she whispered, "I have a plan..."

While Harry was expecting Wormtail to stab him in the chest, he was surprised to feel a sharp pain in his left wrist just as he heard a loud noise. Opening his eyes, he saw Wormtail go flying, the cauldron was overturned, and a man with a long white beard and an angry expression on his face was standing not far away pulling out his wand.

"Surrender, Peter Pettigrew!" the old man shouted before he started chasing after the Death Eater, who transformed into a rat to escape.

Harry had never felt happier to see anyone in his life, let alone his Headmaster. Looking down, Harry saw the baby creature on the ground, and it was slowly crawling towards his wand. Harry had no idea if Voldemort could use a wand in his present form, but he really did not want to find out the answer was yes.

His right hand was still securely fastened, but he realized the ropes had been cut from his left hand by Wormtail's knife as Dumbledore had knocked the Death Eater aside. Even with one hand free, Harry could not reach his wand and Voldemort was getting far too close to the wand for comfort.

He saw his right hand was tied to a somewhat thin piece of stone. That gave him an idea. It was going to hurt, but a little or even a lot of pain was better than being dead. With all the strength he could muster, fueled by his adrenaline, he swung his left palm as hard and as fast as he could at the stone. As the stone broke off, he felt massive pain from his left hand, forcing an involuntary grunt at the sensation, but he could not stop to concern himself with possibly broken bones now.

Pulling his right hand off the stump of stone, ropes dangling from his wrist, Harry dove for his wand. He grabbed it just as the baby did, but Harry was many times stronger and easily pulled it away.

"Give me that wand," it screamed.

"No! Stupefy!" Harry screamed. The baby creature collapsed and lay still on the ground. The anger from tonight, his parents being killed, and all of the other things Voldemort had done, including the pain to Ginny in his second year, came to mind. Thinking about it all, he raised his wand again and started to cast, "Re-" when his arm was grabbed.

Looking up, he saw Professor Dumbledore holding his wand hand. "Wait, Harry, now is not the time."

"What?! But we need to..."

"Stop, Harry." Dumbledore's calm voice cut across his anger, and Harry was baffled why the man would want the monster on the ground to survive. "Can Miss Weasley and those around her still hear us?"

"Yes, Professor."

In a very quiet whisper, Dumbledore said, "I need you to turn your necklace off for a few minutes so we can discuss this. Assure her you are still alive and that we will return soon, but we must speak privately before we return."

Harry finally nodded, exhaling slowly and faintly realizing that his body was throbbing with pain. Taking a breath, Harry said, "I'm OK, Ginny, we're OK. We'll be back in a few minutes. I need to turn this off until then. Please don't worry, Professor Dumbledore is here. I'll see you soon. Good-bye Guinevere." He looked up as his Headmaster. "It's off now, Professor. What's so important that we shouldn't get rid of Voldemort right now? Once and for all?"

It was immediately apparent that Dumbledore was at a loss for where to start, and Harry understood that this could be a very long

conversation. But he also knew it needed to be done quickly, for his body was only going to take so much pain before shutting down. "There are many things I could tell you Harry, but the important ones are that I do not believe the circumstances are right to be able to completely kill Tom Riddle at this time. Do you remember the diary he created in his second year?"

"Yes..." Harry had a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, and he feared where the headmaster would take this explanation.

"Tom was trying to make himself immortal when he created that diary. I believe he has created other objects like it. Until we discover the truth, and all potential objects can be found and destroyed, we cannot completely be rid of him. Killing his body right now would only let him flee in spirit form again."

"Then what do we do?" Harry asked, unwilling to just give up.

"I will transform Tom in his present state into a statue, and then we will hide him very carefully while we search for those objects Tom may have created. That will prevent him from doing anything more until we are ready to deal with him for the last time. When that moment comes, I promise that I will let you rid the world of Tom Riddle personally if you wish. No one has more of a right to do so than you do, Harry." Harry had a feeling that the headmaster was omitting details about the situation, but the big picture was clear, as was their lack of an alternative.

Harry considered that for a brief moment in silence, his pain growing and the disturbing scenery pressing on his consciousness. "OK, I guess that sounds like the right thing. I really do want to get rid of him. Where will we put him until then? I can't think of anywhere safe."

Dumbledore smiled and his eyes seemed to twinkle in the low light. "I know just the place, Harry, and I'm reasonably certain that only you and I will be able to go there. Let's take care of Tom, and then we can return and take care of the other matters here." He pointed to an unconscious and trussed up Wormtail.

"Professor? Why did you want me to turn my necklace off? Can't I tell Ginny this? I know she would want Tom dead too, especially after what he did to her."

The old man smiled kindly. "You may tell Ginny as long as you get her to promise to keep it all to herself. But tell me Harry, do you trust Minister Fudge?"

"No."

"Nor do I, and he was standing near Miss Weasley when I left. Were he to know we had Voldemort captive, he would almost certainly interfere. At the least, he may want to try to kill him, ultimately failing, which would make matters worse than they are now. Come now, let us hurry and no one else will be any wiser, as they will think we just had to fight a Death Eater."

Dumbledore turned and with a wave of his wand and a spell Harry had never heard before, the baby creature turned into stone. It was still disturbing to look at, not the least of which was from the sheer ugliness.

That had barely happened when Harry heard a noise behind him. Turning, he saw the second-largest snake he had ever seen, the largest being the basilisk he had slain two years ago. "Stupefy!" he shouted, and the snake abruptly stopped moving just before it had reached him.

"Ah, very good reflexes, Harry. That bite would have been very painful, and you have helped us greatly by capturing Nagini." Looking into the overturned cauldron, Dumbledore nodded to himself and Vanished the contents. Righting it, he put the stone figurine of Tom Riddle into the metal container. Doing a special revealing spell on the snake, the old wizard smiled to himself as the spell showed positive. "Yes, very good, Harry. The snake is another part of Tom, like the diary was." With a few sharp movements of his wand, he coiled the limp snake like a rope and transfigured it into stone as well, before it was also placed into the cauldron.

Lastly, the Headmaster shrunk the cauldron until it would easily fit in his hand, whereupon he handed it to Harry. "Put this under your injured arm and hold on tightly. Good, now let me have your uninjured hand. Fawkes?" The bird flew over and before Harry knew what was happening, they were flying and then flashed to a pitch-black place.

A set of torches on the walls suddenly lit, and Harry recognized the Chamber of Secrets. Fawkes set them down and then landed on Dumbledore's shoulder. The headmaster worked almost frantically, restoring the cauldron to original size before putting what Harry assumed was a ward on the thing. Dumbledore made sure Harry knew the password after had finished the series of spells. Doing another spell, the old man waved his wand around the area and ended by touching his wand to Harry's chest as he said, "Voldemort's resting place." Harry felt a strange, small weight settle on him, almost as if it were buried in the back of his brain somewhere.

"What was that, Professor?"

"I just put this small area under a Fidelius Charm to hide it. While I believe only you and I can get here, I wanted to be very sure only we could find the cauldron. You are the secret keeper, so you can always come here. Since I did the spell, I know the secret, though I cannot tell anyone. When we are ready to destroy Tom, we will return here." Dumbledore paused to look around at everything for a long moment, and Harry wondered whether the headmaster had ever come back to the chamber once Fawkes knew how to find it. "Grab onto my hand so we can go again. You need to see a nurse and a young lady," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Harry smiled as he clutched the Headmaster's hand. A few seconds later, they were back at the graveyard with Fawkes's help. He watched the Professor do a quick spell on the trophy. "As I suspected, Harry, it was a one-way Portkey. Even if you could have returned to the trophy, it would not have taken you anywhere."

Dumbledore set the trophy in front of Harry and then levitated Cedric and Pettigrew over. Aiming his wand at the large trophy, he firmly tapped it while saying, "Portus."

"Fawkes, please take this one back." The phoenix flew over and grabbed Pettigrew's clothes with its talons and flashed out. "Grab the trophy on three, Harry; one, two, three..." They both grabbed the trophy, with Dumbledore holding onto Cedric, and they went spinning back to Hogwarts.

How they landed without hitting anyone, Harry would never know or understand. Before he could get his bearings, however, he was bowled over by a redhead moving at the speed of a well-hit Bludger. He loved her holding him and kissing his face, but his left hand was pure agony to him now.

"Ginevra Weasley! Get off of him!"

Ginny grinned at him and quickly kissed him on the lips one more time before she obeyed her mother and rolled off. "Are you OK?"

"I think my hand's broken, and my wrist is cut a little, but I'm otherwise fine," he told his girlfriend. She slowly helped him up, while her mother grabbed his other arm to help.

Madam Pomfrey arrived out of breath from the other side of the pitch and started fussing over him. Soon, his pain went away and he was healed again, though the matron was making it clear he failed to understand the gravity of the situation. Not fully satisfied, the nurse started leading Harry up to the hospital wing with Ginny and her mother in tow, both unwilling to leave his side.

As they left, Harry noticed the Headmaster talking to the grieving parents of Cedric Diggory. As bad as he felt for them, he was relieved he was not a part of that conversation.

Almost no one noticed Alastor Moody slowly backing away from the crowd towards the Forbidden Forrest -- only Hermione Granger was paying attention. Seeing their Defense professor slowly step back, she sent Neville over to talk to the twins. They needed to be separated by a wide angle, and they definitely needed more firepower. Making an overt production out of watching Neville walk away, she kept her peripheral vision trained on the one-legged man, and she saw Moody continue to back away.

Her focus on her peripheral vision was so great, she almost missed the fact that Neville was now walking back toward her. At the halfway point, he rapidly turned and fired a Stunning Spell at their Defense teacher. True to his motto, the ex-Auror was able to bring a shield up in time to block Neville's spell. Seeing two more Stunning spells come from the twins, he turned right to block them as well, but he never saw the one from Hermione that hit him in the left shoulder. With a satisfied expression as the man fell limply to the ground, she cast, "Accio Wand!" and the teacher's wand came flying to her.

Neville followed her stunner with a sharply cast, "Incarcerous!" to make sure the unconscious teacher could not run away. The twins joined them, ostensibly to make sure the man stayed put, although Hermione doubted their entire honesty and hoped to curb any excesses they had in mind.

To her shock and dismay, a few minutes later the body at their feet started morphing. "Oh my! He's on Polyjuice!" Hermione exclaimed. She turned and ran towards the Headmaster, who was talking with the Minister for Magic and Professor McGonagall. "Professor! Come quick! We've caught a spy!" A moment later, Barty Crouch, Jr., lay on the ground instead of Alastor Moody.

(Wed 28 Jun)

Harry lay in bed thinking deeply, having awakened from another nightmare. The sun had just started shining through the window to his dorm, and he guessed that breakfast was not due for another couple of hours. He still needed to pack, but he knew that would not take long.

He now had the full story of what had been going on this year with Barty Crouch, both of them. Junior had confessed under Veritaserum before he had been taken away for another trial. Peter Pettigrew had also been taken away for a trial. The Minister for Magic could not deny their existence in front of so many witnesses. That forced the reluctant Ministry to acknowledge that Sirius was innocent of all the charges against him, the ones he never had a trial for. Harry hoped Fudge did not stay in office for long because of that injustice.

After a protracted conversation with Sirius and Harry together, Dumbledore had given in and promised Harry that he did not have to return to the Dursleys ever again, though the old wizard still thought it was a good idea. As a compromise, he was going to put Sirius's house under the Fidelius Charm today while Harry was riding the train to London. Sirius had promised that Harry could have his own room at Sirius's family home, and the two of them would spend the summer redecorating the house, as it had not been lived-in in years. All in all, things were mostly good; yet he still felt depressed due to Cedric's death.

Another issue was that he still had yet to have a talk with Ginny -- they had not been able to get time alone. He had put her off saying it was all very painful and he did not want to relive it, but he knew he was going to have to tell her everything that had happened. He had vaguely promised her he would after they got home. Harry wondered if he should tell Sirius too, as he could tell them at the same time, but he decided not to. Dumbledore had said he could tell Ginny, but had not mentioned anyone else.

To Sirius, Hermione, Neville, and the rest of the Weasleys, he stuck with the "official" story. The Death Eaters Pettigrew and Crouch Jr. had been after him for some bizarre ritual to help Voldemort, but neither he nor Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort's presence. Dumbledore had later quietly told him that he would start looking for other cursed objects that held parts of Tom's soul the day after school let out.

Not able to find any other reason to delay, Harry got up and took a shower. Since the others were either waking or getting up, he opened his trunk and with a few waves of his wand to summon all of his things, they all jumped inside the trunk, though it was a bit haphazard as his concentration was weak. Grabbing its handle, he took it downstairs so it could be taken to the train.

"Good morning," he heard.

With a smile at the voice, he turned to his girlfriend and pulled her into a hug. He liked her hugs, the feel of her body against his. He

liked her good morning kiss, too. There was something about her that drove away all the sadness.

The foursome had their own compartment on the train. They were chatting amicably about the upcoming summer when the door opened slowly. Ron stood there, watching them and shifting slightly from foot to foot. "Do you guys mind if I sit with you?" he quietly asked.

Harry looked around and none of the other three objected, so in an emotionless voice, he said, "Go ahead, Ron, if you want to."

Ron nodded as he closed the door behind him. Not sure that he wanted to sit next to Harry and Ginny just yet, he sat down next to Hermione, who was holding hands with Neville. "When did you two start doing that?" he asked, careful to keep any feelings out of his tone of voice.

"I asked her to be my girlfriend yesterday," Neville answered. "I know I'm slow, but I finally realized she likes me too, so I got off my duff and did something about it."

"Oh, uh, congratulations then," Ron tried to sound happy for them, and he mostly was; but Ron also felt slightly jealous of Neville. He would have to think about why that might be later, since right now he was focused on other things.

After some more uncomfortable silence, Ron looked at his former best mate. "Err, Harry, I've been doing a lot of ... of thinking this term. Staying in the sixth-year dorm gave me a lot of time to myself."

Everyone was silent.

"Anyway, I think I see your point now, and I'd like to apologize to you for everything. I ... I was wrong to accuse you of putting your name in the Goblet." Ron exhaled for a moment, happy to finally start clearing the air. "I also said a lot of, uh, ugly things that weren't true to you as well as a lot of things I didn't really mean. I also acted, well, like a big git. Trying to fight you was pretty stupid too, I had no reason to." Ron consciously tried to relax his hands from gripping the seat too hard, surprised it was so hard to say this directly. "Every time this year I've

asked Ginny if she's happy, she's said yes, so I reckon you didn't deserve any of my anger there either. For what it's worth, Harry, I'm sorry for it all."

Harry said nothing for a moment, although there was one thought running around his brain: finally. Out loud he asked in a plain tone, "Why, Ron? Why'd you do it? And why apologize now?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know how to completely answer that. Like I said, I was stupid and not thinking about what I said before I said it. I was also, well, really jealous of you. You seemed to just get everything, you know? I almost apologized after the first task. I could see being in the Tournament was no picnic, but something about you winning just made me angrier, and you looked like you had everything under control, which made me envious. I've got a real problem with anger, Harry. I've been having sessions with Madam Pomfrey about it all term. She's helped me understand it better, and I can control it some, most of the time now, but I still have more work to do there."

"Is that all?" Harry asked, not sure what more he wanted, but also sure there should be something else.

"Yeah. I want you to know that I'd like to be f-friends again. I don't know if we can be best friends again or not, but I'd like to ... well, to be your friend again. I consider you my friend."

Harry looked at Ron, letting the silence stretch out. He had finally admitted to everything that had been bothering Harry, so forgiving him was possible. After a moment, Harry told him, "I'll forgive you, Ron. We can be friends again, but it won't be like it was before. I can't go back to that. Actions do have consequences." Harry felt like he had been betrayed by a brother, and that was going to be hard to get over.

"I know," Ron agreed softly. "Thank you, Harry. I really couldn't ask for more after what I did, and I know about consequences now, trust me. I'm still experiencing the consequences from this year, and will for a long time to come."

Harry watched Ron turn to the girl next to him. "Hermione, I'd like to apologize to you. I said some very mean things that I really had no business saying, and truthfully, did not really mean. I said them out of anger, though I know that does not make them any less hurtful. I won't do that again. I'm sorry, Hermione."

Hermione nodded, but she could admit to herself that the hurt was still there. "I'll forgive you too, but as with Harry, it won't be like before. That really hurt me." Their big argument still stood out in her mind. He had called her almost every name in the book when she had defended Harry, something she would never have expected from another Gryffindor, let alone one of her best friends. He had acted like Draco Malfoy towards her. That had made her not only drop him from 'best friend' to 'acquaintance,' but she had also purposefully stopped helping him. She refused to help with his homework and she had stopped partnering with him in class immediately after their fight.

"Of course, I understand," Ron told her. "Thank you for giving me a second chance. Neville? I said a few things to you the night I was kicked out of your dorm room. I'm terribly sorry about that."

"I understand, Ron. Thank you for doing this," the brown haired boy replied calmly.

Lastly, Ron turned to his sister. "Ginny, I'm not sure if I hurt you or Harry worse. I know I reacted to him more, but you're family and I should never have turned on you or said what I did. I still think I should help to protect you, but I realize I went way overboard. Once you told me you liked Harry, I should have stopped. Will you be able to forgive me?"

Ginny was actually impressed. Her brother was showing that he was capable of caring about others, and even that he knew how to use his brain. Perhaps it was an overly late start, but he seemed to be trying to make amends for that. Maybe he would grow up after all, she thought. "Why did you do it, Ron? Who said you needed to protect me from boys?"

Ron shrugged. "No one, but I'm your big brother and I think that's what all big brothers are supposed to do."

"And that was your biggest mistake, Ron," Ginny told him. "You did not ask me if I needed protection, and then tried to run my life for me. I'll forgive you, Ron, but like Harry and Hermione, I'm going to watch you carefully. And if you hurt Harry or Hermione again like you did before, so help me, you better hope Mum and Dad are there to protect you, because family or not, I will not let you have the opportunity to do that again."

Ginny was further impressed that Ron held her gaze as he quietly told her, "Of course, I would expect nothing less." And Ginny realized he truly had expected exactly that from her. He must have remembered she was passionate about whatever she did. Their past history together should have made it clear that if she loved someone, she would protect them with her last breath. Unfortunately, she admitted to herself, her temper tended to cause her to pursue revenge too, even if it took her last breath.

Motion caught everyone's attention, but while Ginny was recognizing who was outside their door, Harry acted just as Draco Malfoy arrived at the door. Whipping out his wand, Harry put a locking spelling on the door that he normally would not have learned until his seventh year. Ginny immediately recognized it from their training sessions, and she knew it was a spell that a simple Alohomora would not undo. He had barely finished when Ginny decided to add to it, and she shot an Unbreakable charm at the glass. Almost instantly after her spell hit, one from Hermione conjured curtains for the window so they would not have to look at Malfoy's ugly face.

"Now why haven't we done that in the past?" Neville asked with a laugh.

"Because fourth years should have known only the spell Ginny used. Of course, the locking spell Harry used and the conjuring of the curtains are only learned in NEWT level Charms class, so most of the school will never learn them," Hermione explained.

"But I think we'll start doing this every ride," Harry proclaimed with satisfaction. "The trip seems better already."

Ron watched Harry pull his hand out of Ginny's and then put his arm around her shoulders to snuggle her in closer to him. Then they started whispering to each other. He could not hear what they were saying, but he could see smiles on their faces. They looked like normal teenagers and appeared to be genuinely happy together. Looking over, he saw Hermione pull out a book and Neville leaned over so he could read it with her.

The little jealous thoughts returned and he recognized them for what they were. As he pondered why he was jealous, which Madam Pomfrey had taught him to do, he realized he was jealous of Neville because he, Ron Weasley, somewhat fancied Hermione. With all the fighting they had engaged in with each other over the years, that was so strange to think about that he almost fell off of the bench. With a sigh, he realized that was yet another boat he had missed this year. Either Neville would change his mind, and Ron could have a chance some day, or else Ron knew he would find someone else he liked. Either way, he could not do anything about it, so he closed his eyes and tried to take a nap. He knew he would be home all too soon, with more music to be faced.

As the train pulled into the station at King's Cross, the five friends got out to find their parents or guardians with hugs of welcome. Harry was happy to see Sirius there, standing in the open.

"Hey, kiddo!"

"Sirius! You made it." Harry let go of Ginny's hand to give his godfather a hug. Harry saw Ginny use that time to hug her mother. As they both took a step back, they seemed to gravitate back to one another, and Harry clasped her hand in his again.

"Of course I made it. I got everything straightened out with the Ministry yesterday afternoon, so I've spent most of my free time today trying to get the house ready for us. I hope you're up to a lot of work this summer, because it hasn't been lived-in in ten years, and there's no telling what we'll find in there as we clean and redecorate."

Harry grinned. "Sounds like an adventure." He lowered his voice. "Will I get to use magic?"

Sirius smiled and nodded. "The house is unplottable and has so many security wards over it, the Ministry can't tell who's doing what in it."

"Yes!" Harry hissed and pumped his arm. "I think I'm actually looking forward to summer homework for once."

While Sirius laughed, Ginny asked, "I'll get to come over too, won't I?"

"Of course," Harry said without thinking. Then realizing how fast he had answered, he looked at his godfather, and he knew his expression had to betray his emotions.

The look of mischief on Sirius's face made it clear he was very tempted to say no just to tease him, but Harry was happy that something stopped him. "Of course, Harry. She and all your friends are welcome to come visit you. I'll just need to add them to the access list. However, it might be good to postpone their coming for at least a week. I'm not sure how safe the house is for visitors. I've only managed to make a few rooms ready. Before we go though, silently read and memorize this." He showed his godson a note he had just pulled out of his robes.

In Sirius's writing, Harry read: The most noble House of Black may be found at number 12 Grimmauld Place in London. When Harry had finished, Sirius also showed it to Ginny and Ron, as well as their mother, and finally to Neville too. After all of Harry's friends had seen it, Sirius pulled out his wand and Vanished the paper.

After telling his friends good-bye and that he would invite them over soon, Harry gave a parting kiss to his girlfriend, trying to ignore the somewhat disapproving look from her mother and the cocky grin of his godfather. After he promised Ginny that he would write her as soon as possible, Harry grabbed his owl cage and trunk. Sirius put his hands on Harry's shoulders and Apparated them both to the front doorstep of a tall but thin and dingy looking terrace house.

After registering Harry's look upon viewing the exterior of the house, Sirius explained while Harry just stared. "It's seen better days, Harry. I think it will take us most of the summer to get it restored, but that

could be fun since we get to use magic. Oh, and don't worry about Muggles, since they can't see the house. Now, I meant it when I said it would take at least a week to get more parts safe for guests. There's some scary stuff in there. Get your wand out, Harry, and be ready for anything." Sirius waited until Harry had pulled his wand out, then he opened the door and pulled Harry's trunk inside.

Harry followed Sirius, carrying Hedwig in her cage. He was about to ask Sirius a question when the man put his finger to his lips, so Harry stayed silent for the moment as Sirius closed the front door. It was a drab looking foyer, which included what looked like a big portrait with curtains over it on the wall. There was also an umbrella stand that reminded him of the troll from his first year. Sirius walked over to the stairs on the side and started going up. Resigned to finding out the secrets later, Harry continued to follow.

At the first room on the second floor, Sirius went in and put Harry's trunk down. Harry also entered the room and saw it was a bedroom with two single beds. There were also wardrobes there, and one was open showing what were obviously Sirius's clothes.

"All right, Harry. We'll have to share this bedroom for a night or two. I'm sure this one is completely safe, as is the bathroom down at the end of the hall. The other bedrooms I've barely even looked at, so I've closed their doors. The kitchen is downstairs in the basement, and I'll take you to in a moment. I'm pretty sure the kitchen is also safe, but I can't vouch for any other rooms."

"OK," Harry acknowledged. "Why did we have to be quiet in the foyer?"

"You saw the covered portrait there?" Harry nodded. "That," Sirius said with a grimace, "is my mad mother. When she's woken, she'll rant and swear so loudly she would wake up sleepers even on the third floor. So be very quiet when you pass by her. We'll figure out how to remove her later. She seems to have some sort of permanent sticking charm on her."

"And the elf heads on the wall?" Harry queried.

"Former servants. I won't lie to you, Harry. While I'm like you, my family has been Dark for generations and this house reflects that. Between the things that my parents had here and the fact that it's been unattended for ten years, except by an insane house-elf, this is not a nice place. We have lots of work to do to make a nice place, but we can handle that. I have the entire Black fortune at my disposal to renovate this house." Sirius then grinned wickedly. "We'll have plenty of bonding moments doing the work, and you'll have plenty of stories to tell your friends and girlfriend later."

Harry grinned. "That's sounds great."

"Well, it is about dinner time and I do have some food downstairs, so let me show you the kitchen." Harry once more followed his godfather, this time down two flights of stairs. He was careful not to make any noise as they passed area by the portrait, and they walked into the kitchen.

"I thought you said you had a house-elf?" At Sirius's look, he quickly added, "Not that I'm saying he needs to make our meal or anything, I don't mind, but I thought that's what they did."

Sirius chuckled as he pulled some food out and started working on dinner. "And you would be right. However, Kreacher, the last house-elf here, died this morning. When I got here to claim the places as my residence and for Dumbledore to put it under the Fidelius Charm, I found him to be quite insane, not to mention the fact that he would've been dangerous to you. He would not see your godson status as being family. So I gave him clothes and told him to leave, and well ... he couldn't deal with it and fell over dead. Considering how he was going on and on about what a saint my departed demented mother was, it's probably for the best."

Harry watched his godfather put a six-pack of Butterbeer and a store-bought apple pie on the table. He then started on some sandwiches.

"Do you remember about pixies, doxies, magical molds, Boggarts, and other pests from school?"

The disastrous lesson with Lockhart in his second year briefly jumped into Harry's mind before he shoved it away. "Yeah, Professor Lupin covered all that last year. Are you saying we'll find those things here?" Harry was not concerned, just surprised.

"All that and more. I took a quick tour this morning and removed the worst of the creatures, except for the Boggart in the study. We'll clean the house one room at a time, then after it's all clean and safe, we'll start the redecorating." Sirius moved to the table with the sandwiches, setting the plates down. "I can't wait to get rid of all the snake symbols around the house, either. Perhaps we can find some lion handles and other hardware to replace them with. Bon-appetite."

Harry saw two sandwiches that were easily taller than his mouth was going to be able to bite. Harry thought that one of these things was easily equal to two at school given how loaded with stuff it was.

After dinner, Sirius gave him a short tour, which ended with them starting work on another bedroom. Harry thought that starting was hardly apt, as there was still far more to do by the time they both were tired and went to bed.

(Thu 29 Jun)

Sirius awoke with a start. Being wakened by screaming was not uncommon while living in Azkaban, but he did not think that should be normal for his godson.

"No!" Harry was screaming again, over and over.

Jumping out of bed, he went over and grabbed his godson, not only to wake him, but also to protect himself from Harry's flailing limbs. "Harry!" He shook him lightly. "Harry!" The boy's eyes flew open wide as his screaming stopped. As gently as he could, Sirius told him, "It's all right, Harry. You're safe with me." Sirius let go of his godson as soon as he saw a look of embarrassment come over the boy. Harry turned over and buried his face in his pillow.

Looking at the clock, Sirius saw it was nearly six in the morning. Deciding it was best if he said nothing at the moment, he went back

to sit on his bed, not returning to sleep. He watched Harry lay there, obviously not sleeping either.

After a few minutes, Sirius softly asked, "I remember in prison how everyone tended to sleep more or less like that, Harry. Do you want to talk about it?" Harry shook his head, still facing the wall. Sirius decided to just let him be for the moment, but he also resolved to not let it go for long without helping his godson work this out.

An hour later, Sirius decided that laying about was not helping and got up, heading to the bathroom. A hot shower helped his frame of mind, and he felt a little more relaxed. When he went back to the bedroom, he saw Harry was still staring at the wall. Digging through his clothes, Sirius pulled out some new jeans and a shirt he had bought yesterday, putting them on.

"Harry? If you're not going to sleep, why don't you get up and take a shower? When you're done, I'll have breakfast ready and then we can work on the house for a while. I think if you keep busy, you'll be fine soon." Or so Sirius hoped, as he could easily guess at the source of the nightmare.

It took a few minutes, but Harry did get out of bed and headed off to the bathroom. Sirius went downstairs to start breakfast with a sigh, wishing he could make Harry feel better.

A full breakfast did not seem to pull Harry out of his funk, which made Sirius a little more concerned. Working on the bedroom they had started cleaning did not help either, and Sirius thought Harry had a bad case of the mopes. Sirius was surprised at how unlike yesterday everything was, then Harry had seemed reasonably normal.

They had finished cleaning the bedroom by noon, so Sirius said, "Harry? Since this is the largest of the extra bedrooms, why don't you move your stuff in here? I'll stay where we are now until the master bedroom is ready for me. When you finish moving your things, come downstairs and I'll have lunch ready for us, OK?"

Harry nodded and silently went across the hall to where he had slept last night.

Sirius went downstairs. He had to do something for Harry; he loved the boy too much to let this go on, but he was unsure about what to do. By the time he reached the kitchen, he had an idea of who would know what to do with a moody Harry. Throwing some Floo powder in the fireplace, he called out "The Burrow" and stepped in.

He came out into the Weasley living room completely covered in soot. He was going to have to get the Floo cleaned back at Grimmauld Place, for the ash level was simply disgusting. With a wave of his wand, he was clean again, just in time to avoid the homemaker seeing him bring ashes into her house.

"Sirius? Is there a problem?"

"Hello, Molly. Not to be too blunt, but yes; I need your help."

"Certainly, Sirius, anything I can do. What's the problem?"

Sirius scratched the side of his face as he tried to think of how to explain it. "Well, it's Harry. You see, he had a nightmare last night and I can't get him to talk to me about it, and it's still really affecting him."

"Oh, the poor dear," Mrs. Weasley said sympathetically. "How about if I bring over a good lunch? I bet that will help to perk him up."

Sirius smiled, once again thinking of why Harry enjoyed visiting the Weasley family so much. "I'm sure it would help, but I think there's something that would help more. I'd like you to bring Ginny over with you. I know he loves me, but I think he needs a friend more than a father right now."

"Why don't you bring him over here and have lunch here, instead? They can talk then. Ron's here too," Molly suggested.

"Thank you, Molly. You have a heart of gold. We'll be over in a few minutes." He turned and left, catching Molly smiling and leaving the room as he stepped into the Floo.

Ten minutes later, Ginny watched her boyfriend come out of the fireplace. It took all the control she had not to laugh at all the soot and ash on him. Sirius came out right behind him and cleaned them both up.

"Harry..." She went to him and saw his face brighten. After they finished kissing, she saw that they were alone in the room. "Are you OK? Sirius told Mum you weren't feeling well."

"I'm fine," he told her flatly.

She looked at him, not fooled at all. "Well, let's go get lunch. After that, we can spend some time together this afternoon. How does that sound?" He brightened again, so she led him to the heavily laden table. She thought her mum had gone a bit overboard considering there were only two guests, and not ten, but then her mum thought everything could be fixed with a hearty meal.

Ron and the twins were there at the table, and they all gave chipper greetings to Harry. The conversation was very animated and Harry finally started to look fairly normal to her eye, though she knew he was still upset about something.

After they finished a blueberry cobbler, Ginny stood and pulled on his hand. "Harry, let's go for a walk in the back garden. You can tell me about your new home with Sirius." He stood to go with her, and she could feel the tension in his hand.

As Ginny started to lead Harry from the table, she heard her mother. "Ron, do you want to go with them?" Ginny was sure her mother did that for a couple of reasons. She was obviously used to Ron being around Harry, knowing the two used to be best friends, and Ron and Harry still appeared to be friends since they had not fought on the platform. In addition, Ginny was almost certain that her mother felt a bit more comfortable with Ron joining them, like a chaperone.

"No, Mum. I think it needs to be just Harry and I," Ginny said and pulled her boyfriend out the back door. Molly stared after her daughter, surprised that Ginny would be so pointed and abrupt with her.

"It's probably best that way, Mum," Ron said into the silence. "If something is really bothering Harry, he'll probably tell her, but he wouldn't tell me."

"But Ron, you two used to be such good friends; and I thought you two had worked out whatever was in the way of your friendship..."

"Yeah, we did. It was just too late for us to be good friends, let alone best friends, Mum. We're not either right now. You know what I did." Ron hung his head. "I'm not proud of it, and I'm used to this now. It will never be the same with us again. I made too many mistakes that hurt too deeply."

Molly looked to the twins, who were serious for once, and received confirmation with identical nods.

In the back garden, Ginny led Harry on a meandering course, not really paying attention to their surroundings, focusing primarily on getting Harry to relax a bit. She had persuaded him to tell her his first impressions about Sirius's house, and it sounded both exciting and dreadful. She wondered if she could go over and help, not only to be with her boyfriend, but because he said she could also use magic over there -- and that would be fun.

Their path had finally led them to the bench swing her parents used on many summer evenings, so she pulled him to it with her. Sitting, she decided to tackle the problem head on -- that was usually best with Harry. "Harry, how are you feeling right now?"

"Fine."

"Bollocks, Harry! Even without Sirius telling me there is a problem I can tell that's not true. Tell me what the problem is and I'll help you." With a bit of teasing, she added, "And if I can't do anything but listen, I'll do that and then kiss you to make it better."

That evoked a shy smile from him, but it went away. Harry seemed to be trying to talk, although nothing was coming out, so Ginny patiently

waited. Eventually, one of his attempts caught and then all the events from the night of the third task came out.

Ginny was shocked to learn that Voldemort had almost returned. She was quite pleased to know that he had been captured and imprisoned while the Headmaster searched for a way to permanently get rid of the Foul Lord, as she thought of him.

As Harry wound down his tale, he went silent, staring at the ground. With a gentle tenderness, Ginny reached out and stroked his face, lightly wiping away the tears before she turned his head to look at her. "You had a nightmare about that didn't you?" He nodded. "About Cedric and how you think you should have been able to save him, or that he shouldn't have been there, and therefore you killed him?" He could not take it and buried his face into her shoulder. "That's not true, Harry. It wasn't your fault. Wormtail cast the spell. It's not your fault..."

Ginny put her other arm around him and pulled him to her tightly, slowly rocking him as he cried. She did her best to comfort him by rubbing his back slowly up and down. "It's not your fault," she kept murmuring to him.

"... and they just grow up so fast, it's hard to let go sometimes." Molly looked out her kitchen window as she talked to Sirius. She saw her daughter comforting Harry, and it appeared he was leaning into her shoulder for support. "Look at that, I think she's getting through to him."

Sirius stood up and joined her at the window. Taking in the scene of the two teenagers hugging one another, with Ginny in control at the moment, a grin came over him. "I'm really envious of him finding true love so early."

Molly almost twisted her neck off she looked at Harry's godfather so quickly.

"I may not know Harry as well as I'd like yet," Sirius commented, "but I recognize the signs. He's just like his father after Lily started going out James. I'd bet my entire vault that by the time those two finish school, you'll be planning a wedding for them, Molly." It was obvious to her that he was still lost in old memories, unconsciously drifting to

the stove and pouring himself another cup of tea before returning to the table.

Slowly coming over to join him, Molly also took a seat. Her mind was reeling with that thought Sirius had so casually tossed out. "They can't be that serious? She's only about to turn fourteen..."

His barking laughter split the air, causing Molly to come back into the present and look at Harry's guardian. "Don't worry, Molly. I promise I'll help to make sure they don't get married before they finish school, but I'm willing to bet they won't date anyone else. Harry has the look, and I don't think he would cry on any girl's shoulder unless he was very serious about her. That's a level of comfort that would be very special to him."

Ginny kissed his forehead gently and then his lips as Harry got himself under control. "Thanks, Ginny," she heard him say, "but there's one more thing..."

"Of course, Harry, you don't even need to ask," she promised him. "I won't tell anyone, not Neville, or Hermione, or even Ron."

"Thanks, Ginny." He sat up straighter now and pulled her to him, wrapping an arm around her back. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You wouldn't have nearly as much fun," she coyly told him, which caused him to squeeze her tightly for a brief moment in agreement. "Now, that you're feeling better, let's go back in and have Sirius take us to your house. I'll go back with you to help you clean. I bet I can come up with some redecorating ideas, too."

With a genuine smile on his face, which Ginny was happy to see again, he helped her up and they went back inside. There, they found her mother and his godfather sitting at the table and talking. At their entrance, Sirius asked, "Feeling better?"

Harry answered, "Yeah, thanks to Ginny." Ginny noticed that her mum was looking them a bit differently now, but she was unsure whether it was a good type of different. Harry seemed to pick up on the expression as well, as his voice became very uncertain. "Uh,

Ginny had the idea that she could come back with us and help us clean. She said she might give us a few ideas on what to do with the house, too. Is that OK with you?" Ginny was not sure who he was directing that question to, but she decided it was probably to both of the adults.

"Sure, I don't have a problem. We'll all have to stick together," Sirius told them as he got up. "Thank you for the tea and conversation, Molly."

"Anytime Sirius. Would you mind if I came too? Perhaps my experience could be helpful," Mrs. Weasley suggested. Ginny thought that her mum was probably curious about the house, but it was almost certain that she also wanted to keep an eye on her.

"Why not? The more the merrier," Sirius agreed as he turned to go.

"I'll join you in a few minutes, I need to tell Ron and the twins I'll be gone for a few hours." Molly muttered under her breath, "I may need to lock Ron's door to protect him, too."

A few minutes later, all four of them were working on the living room. It was the first time Ginny had ever been allowed to clean with her wand and she was actually enjoying it, at least compared to cleaning at home. Considering how much mischief the twins had gotten into at home, the girl started to wonder if she could get away with using magic to clean there, too. Considering how much magic the twin's pranks required, maybe at home her spells would not be traced to her because she was in a wizarding house where adults lived. She would have to try it once to see. Even if she was found out, that would be worth a warning to know, just in case she could use magic after all and her parents had purposefully not told her.

Over the next two weeks, Ginny continued to go over to see Harry after her chores were done at home. To her consternation, she rarely went alone. Normally, her mother sent Ron over too, and occasionally even the twins.

The twins and Sirius got along wonderfully, so she and Harry would use those opportunity to their romantic advantage. All in all, it was

turning out to be a wonderful summer in Ginny's opinion, and based on Harry's grin whenever she saw him, she was far from alone in that thought.

(A/N: I suspect you can now see why I have not planned to write any other years within this story universe. There is no reason for the Ministry to send Umbridge to Hogwarts, Voldemort is not a problem, the remaining Death Eaters are like they have been for the past 14 years (hiding and/or trying to be normal), and there can be no new Death Eaters. In fact, the only real problems Harry will have will be any of his own making, verbal abuse from Snape, and any annoyances Draco Malfoy creates, which are relatively minor in the whole scheme of things. So the other years would be pretty boring IMO.

When I first wrote this story about 7 months ago, I was so proud of myself for having a unique resolution to the 3rd task. Alas, about a month later while I was searching for a beta, Intromit published ch17-alt of "Fate's Debt" with a conceptually similar ending. That'll teach me to not to congratulate myself on cleverness ever again. :-)

All we have left is an epilogue which I'll use to tie up the loose ends, as well as to jump forward in time a little to show you how life goes on.)

Chapter 6: Epilogue

(Tue 1 Aug)

Harry was having breakfast with the Weasleys. He had enjoyed a wonderful birthday party at The Burrow last night, and Sirius had let him spend the night. While he might have stayed in Bill or Charlie's old room, he had slept in the same room as Ron for the first time since last December. He was willing to bet it was because Mrs. Weasley felt that was more proper since Ron could keep an eye on him, though she had not used those words. She had said she thought he would be more comfortable there, but he was sure it was for her comfort. He supposed it was the price to be paid for dating her daughter.

As they were finishing up an excellent breakfast, four owls came in the window and settled on the table. The four Weasley teens removed letters from the owl's legs. "Our school letters!" Ginny exclaimed, before she looked at Harry.

Harry shrugged, not particularly concerned over the lack of a letter. "Mine's probably at home."

"Well, go get it; I'll wait," she told him.

Laughing at his girlfriend's demand, Harry jumped up and Flooed home. When Harry returned less than a minute later, he noticed that the twins had already ripped open their envelopes, but he had expected as much. They had no need or desire to wait on him. Ron waited with his sister, though Harry thought he saw a sad look on Ron's face. It looked like Ginny was also aware of her brother's peculiar expression, and he thought she might be about to ask him about it, but his return interrupted her.

Mrs. Weasley was standing there, obviously waiting for the report. "Well?" she asked as Harry sat down.

"Sorry, Mum," Fred started.

"We're in seventh year next year," George continued the joke.

The woman rolled her eyes at their antic and let it go. She looked eagerly to the other three.

Spying Harry's slightly thicker envelope, Ginny urged him, "Well, go on Harry, open it." As he looked at her, she stopped his question. "No, you first."

He shook his head while rolling his eyes at her, but that got him lightly smacked on the back of the head while he opened his letter. As he pulled the report out, a badge with a large 'P' on it also came out.

"I knew it!" Ginny squealed and threw her arms around Harry. "Congratulations, Harry."

He smiled at the prefect badge, although he was somewhat surprised to see it.

The twins started teasing him until their mother glared at the pair. "Congratulations, Harry," she told him. Harry thought that she sounded faintly disappointed that Ron was not picked, but he thought that after the events at Christmas, she probably had not really expected Ron to become Prefect. Harry also knew that Ron did not keep his grades up enough, though he tried to hide that fact from everyone. Ginny had mentioned to him in the spring that McGonagall had visited her mum, telling them that Ron was still struggling with his work.

"Your turn, Ginny," Harry told her.

Nervously opening the envelope, she said, "I bet Hermione got picked as the girl's prefect. We'll have to owl her and see." Hardly breathing, she pulled out her letter and started reading. After a moment, an ear splitting scream erupted from the petite girl and she again threw her arms around Harry.

Harry knew that meant she had been successful in her plan and stood. Picking her up, he twirled her around. He set her down with a quick kiss before telling her, "Congratulations, Ginny! I knew you could do it!"

"What? It's not that hard to get into the fourth year," Ron sullenly commented, his letter still sealed in his hand.

Ginny, still beaming, handed her letter to her mother. While the woman was occupied, Ginny stole a longer kiss from her boyfriend, which Harry was happy to succumb to.

Looking up, Mrs. Weasley had something between a confused look and a smile on her face. "I assume you want to do this, Ginny?"

"Absolutely! You have no idea how hard I studied to do that," his girlfriend exuberantly exclaimed. "Not only did I have to study really hard, but I had to take twice as many exams."

George reached up and pulled the letter from his mother's hand. A short moment later, he and his twin had scanned it. "Blimey, Gin!"

"Crikey!" Fred added.

Ron grabbed the letter and scanned it. "Oh, bloody hell!" he said despondently.

"Watch your language, young man," his mother reprimanded as she also rapped her knuckles on his head. "It's rare someone gets the chance to skip a year. Now open your letter so we can see how you did on your exams."

With obvious dread and what Harry thought was simply fearing the worst, as he had not had Hermione to help him for most of the year, Ron slowly opened his letter. Pulling it out, he scanned his letter. Emotionlessly, he put it on the table and got up to leave.

His mother quickly grabbed it and read it. "Ron?" she called after her youngest son.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked back at her. "I'm sorry, Mum. I tried hard, I really did." He then continued up the stairs for his room.

Ginny looked at the letter on the table, quickly scanning it. "Oh, poor Ron," she said with real sympathy for her struggling brother. "He's having to repeat the fourth year."

The twins looked at each other, and for once, they did not tease their brother. That would have been beneath them, and Harry knew that everyone in Gryffindor had seen how hard Ron had tried, how many late nights he had put in studying by himself. Harry knew they would make fun of him for a lot of things, but not for this.

"Well," Mrs. Weasley finally said, breaking the extended silence, "I suppose I need to sign your permission slip, Ginny, so you can go forward. I'll even take it to Professor McGonagall for you. I think I need to speak with her to see if I can do anything to help Ron over the summer."

"Thanks, Mum," Ginny said and gave her mum a hug. "I'm going to go over to Harry's for the day. Sirius said we're to start redoing the library today, so I'm going to help them pick out colors."

"All right, dear. Please stay with both of them."

As Ginny was leaving, Molly heard her daughter say, "Just think, Harry, we'll have all the same classes now and get to spend that much more time together." Thinking about what that might mean, coupled with Sirius's comments at the beginning of the summer, Molly almost stopped her daughter from going. It finally occurred to her that Sirius must be right for her daughter to have put in so much time and effort to jump ahead a year. That also meant that she and Harry would be graduating from Hogwarts at the same time, which meant they could easily be married immediately after Ginny's seventeenth birthday, if that was what her daughter wanted to do. Molly could not decide if that made her happy for her daughter, or sad for herself at possibly losing her daughter so soon. Of course, that would also mean that she would gain Harry as a seventh son, so maybe the situation did have a bright side.

Shaking her head, she turned her thoughts back to her youngest son and walked over to the fireplace to call Minerva. Maybe there was

something she could help Ron with this summer so he did not have to repeat the fourth year.

(Mon 7 Aug)

Harry and Ginny were buying their school supplies under Sirius's watchful eye, though it was not nearly as watchful as Mrs. Weasley's would have been. He seemed to be quite blind whenever Harry would pull Ginny behind some bookshelf to snog her briefly but thoroughly.

Neville and Hermione had joined them for the day's excursion. To no one's surprise, Hermione was the other Gryffindor fifth year prefect. Neville held her hand as they walked around, as he also held all of her new purchases. Neville confided quietly to Harry that he was very thankful his Gran had let him buy a "Nearly Bottomless Bag(tm)," so he was able to carry around Hermione's tower of books without too much effort.

Ron and the twins had not come to Diagon Alley. Ron stayed behind because he did not need any new books and he was trying to redo his notes from the last year to make the coming year easier. The twins seemed to want to go with their father for some reason unbeknownst to anyone else. Ginny had said she thought her mum was going to interrogate her dad thoroughly about that before she let them go.

With a little bit of help from Neville, Harry convinced Hermione to keep Ginny in the bookstore a little longer, while he and Neville went out to take care of some "boy stuff". Harry dragged Neville a few shops down and they went into the Quidditch Supply store. As fast as he could, Harry bought the new Nimbus 3000 and arranged for it to be owl delivered to Ginny on the 11th of August. He knew there probably would not be a Chaser position open this coming year, but he hoped he could talk this year's captain, Angelina he assumed, into letting Ginny be a reserve player and at least get in on the practice sessions. He was already anticipating Ginny's reaction to the gift, let alone the chance at being on Quidditch team in any capacity.

That done, Harry and Neville hurried back to the bookstore with no extra bags to give Harry away. Ginny appeared to be none the wiser about what had happened, and Harry hoped she thought they had

just gone to another section of the bookstore while she and Hermione had looked at romance novels.

(Fri Sep 1)

After the usual enthusiastic greeting from Ginny when he met her on Platform 9 ¾, the five friends found a compartment together. The train started moving promptly at eleven, whereupon Hermione dragged Harry forward to the prefect's meeting. Harry had made Ginny lock the compartment door, in case Malfoy came by, so they would have a few extra seconds to draw their wands if they needed to. He was sure that if they had their wands out, Ginny and Neville could protect themselves handily. Ron's presence would give some extra security, as that would make it three on three.

Harry thought it was a very boring meeting with Trey Yancy, the Head Boy, conducting most of it. Harry was pleased that Malfoy was not in attendance, although he was rather surprised Snape had not made Malfoy a prefect. The fifth-year Slytherin prefects were Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass. Not seeing Malfoy in the compartment made Harry even happier he had badgered Ginny into locking their compartment door.

That made Harry think about Snape, and his desire to do something about the man this year. In talking with Sirius about it, his godfather gave him advice that he had not expected, telling him not to worry about the greasy git. Strangely, Sirius would not say anything more. In addition, when Harry asked the man what he would be doing now that the house was mostly livable and happy, thanks to a lot of help from Ginny, Sirius had only said that he had something lined up. The rather large mischievous grin on his godfather's face left Harry dubious about whatever hare-brained scheme was the latest pet project in development, but no matter what Harry tried, he could not worm the information out of Sirius.

Still, all in all, it had been the best summer of Harry's life in his own opinion. There were no Dursleys, and for once Harry had felt a little like he was a normal teenager. Once he got over his nightmares at the beginning of the summer, with Ginny's help, he had had a lot of fun. He had enjoyed having Ginny, Hermione, and Neville visit for a

sleep over a few times -- something the Dursleys would never have even considered letting him do.

In some ways, Harry had felt sad for Ron. Not only was Ron having to repeat a grade, but he was more like a distant friend than anything to Harry. Ron's requirement to repeat the fourth year was only going to make it harder to try to overcome the distance between them. They were becoming friends again, but it was definitely a slow process.

On the other hand, Harry thought Ron's sister had made up for that spectacularly. He could not imagine a better girlfriend. After the promise she had whispered in his ear at her birthday party, about how she had a gift for him later -- and that was before she had even received her new broom and given him several very happy looks -- he was very much looking forward to finding a secluded place at school soon.

As Harry and Hermione stood outside their compartment so they could watch the hallway, part of their required patrolling of the rail car, the end door opened and there stood Draco Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle as usual. Harry looked at his fellow prefect as he drew his wand and held it by his side. "You'd think he'd learn to stop doing this, wouldn't you?"

Hermione raised her voice slightly. "I don't think he can learn from his mistakes, Harry. He's not intelligent enough. You know how small a brain ferrets have. He's doomed to keep coming to bother us, just as he's doomed to keep getting hexed."

"Why, you filthy Mudblood," Malfoy started off, obviously not hearing the door behind him open, since he did not stop his tirade. "The only thing you're good for is to practice spells on. I'll bet you're not even any good in bed, though maybe I'd do you if you paid me."

Hermione did not bother to retort, she just smiled, and Harry knew she was enjoying the thought of what was about to happen, just as he was. On the walk back, she had quietly agreed that the Head Boy was a bit boring, but she had immediately followed that with how he was very nice for a Hufflepuff.

"Mr. Malfoy," Trey Yancy said coldly from behind the Slytherin trio, "I've heard about your feud with Potter and his friends here, but I really don't understand how you can be so stupid as to antagonize them. Have you forgotten that Potter won the Triwizard Tournament last year against three seventh-year students? And Miss Granger, who I just heard you insult, is at the top of your class for a good reason. So you really don't want to be on her bad side. Now, return to your compartment immediately and I'll make sure to talk to your head-of-house so you get only one week of detention to think about all that."

"You don't scare me," Malfoy sneered, foolishly in Harry's opinion. "Snape won't do a thing to me."

"As you wish, you can have two weeks detention," the Head Boy said as if he was discussing the weather, though he also drew his wand. "Now, are you going to leave and stay in your car, or do I get to make you?" The look on his face seemed to indicate he would have preferred Malfoy not to go quietly. Unfortunately, in Harry's opinion, Malfoy strode past the Head Boy, back into his own rail car with his two goons following him.

Yancy looked at the Gryffindors. "Well, no promises, as I can't be everywhere at once, but I'll try to help you out with him this year. I'm so tired of his supremacy attitude and how he treats others." The Head Boy then chuckled to himself. "He's going to be in for such a surprise. See you later, Potter, Granger." The tall seventh year turned and went in the direction Malfoy had gone still chuckling to himself.

"That was interesting," Ginny said, apparently having heard it all through the open compartment door.

"Very," Neville agreed.

"I wonder what the surprise is," Ron commented. No one had an answer.

As the friends walked into the Great Hall for the Sorting and Welcoming Feast, Harry stopped dead in his tracks, causing Neville to run into the back of him.

"Oi, mate! What's wrong?"

Harry just stared and pointed to the head table. There, grinning at all of them, was Sirius Black.

Ginny laughed at her boyfriend. "I think he did that to you on purpose, Harry. Yeah, look at him laugh, definitely so." She pulled on his arm and got him walking again. "You know, we could prank him for not telling us," she suggested.

An evil grin came over Harry as he sat at the long Gryffindor table. "Excellent idea. We can't do it immediately as he'll be watching for it, and we'll need to plan carefully. He's hard to prank. Only one of my pranks from this summer actually worked on him."

"The twins are still planning their joke shop. I bet they'd love to help and would have some good ideas too," she said conspiratorially.

"Hmm, good idea..."

Professor McGonagall chose that moment to walk in with the first years. The Sorting Hat sang about unity, though it indicated that friendships could come from unusual places. The new students were divided up, almost equally between the houses.

During the Sorting, Harry noticed something else unusual about the Head table. One of the other usual professors was missing. Harry assumed he had been called away, but it was nice not to have to deal with the stares and sneers.

The Headmaster stood as the last firstie took her place and Professor McGonagall walked up to the head table. "Welcome everyone to Hogwarts, whether you are a returning student or a new student. Although I have several announcements, I shall save them for later, except for two very short but important ones to help you with your dining discussion."

That caused a slight buzz among the student population.

"I would like to make two introductions. First, for the recently exonerated and new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, please welcome Professor Sirius Black."

The students clapped, especially the Gryffindors.

"Second, due to a job swap, Professor Severus Snape is now at a research company, and from that same company comes our new Potions teacher and the new head of Slytherin house. Please welcome Professor Geoffry Talman."

The welcoming applause from the students was almost deafening, greater than what was normally heard at the awarding of House Cup. About half of the Slytherin table was being half-hearted about it, and Harry thought the other half seemed to be silently cursing their bad fortune. Everyone else in the hall, including many of the professors, were clapping as loudly as they could. The new professor shyly waved, while Harry laughed aloud at the almost universal dislike of the former Potions professor and spy.

Albus looked at all the cheering and yelling students, and let out a long sigh. When Albus had told Severus that Voldemort had been quietly apprehended and imprisoned in such a way that he would not be escaping, the hook-nosed professor had danced a jig and turned in his resignation on the spot. He had even promised Albus to find his own replacement, and in less than forty-eight hours, the very impressive resume of Geoffry Talman was on the Headmaster's desk. When he went to ask Severus about the application, he was dismayed to find that Severus had moved out of the castle completely, and surmised he had packed and left while the ink was drying on his letter of resignation. While the man was not his favorite person to be around, Albus was still a bit sad at the change of life.

As everyone finally quieted down, Dumbledore raised his voice and commanded, "Tuck in!"

When the Headmaster dismissed them to go to their respective houses, Harry thought he had ill luck at the misfortune to be near Malfoy as he tried to exit the great hall at the same time.

"You know, Potter," the Slytherin started, clearly trying something to get Harry into trouble too, after Draco's problem on the train. "It's too bad you can't really fulfill the little Weaslette. I, on the other hand, could show her everything you're not," Malfoy smirked at him and turned to his two sidekicks for them to chuckle with him.

As Harry was trying to quickly decide whether to hit or hex the blond Slytherin git, Ginny whispered something in his ear as Malfoy was not paying attention. He had no idea why she wanted that, but he would give it to her. "I really don't think you could do that, Malfoy," Harry said far too loudly so as many students as possible would hear him. The Slytherin finally turned back to look at him, with an expression of disdain on his face. "You know, the more I think about it, the more I think that your always having those two boys with you means something." Malfoy's look changed to one of confusion for just an instant, which was all his girlfriend needed to verbally pounce.

Ginny loudly gasped. "Oh my, Harry, you're absolutely right. There's no other explanation. Draco's gay!"

"W-W-What?" the boy in question sputtered.

Harry realized what Ginny was doing and did his best to keep up with her. "Yeah, it took me a while to figure out why he always had those two with him. I mean, they can't really do anything else for Malfoy other than to fulfill his, uh, manly needs, now can they? What do you think, Neville?" He could see his friend wanted in on this based on his eager expression.

"Sure, Harry, it's completely obvious now that you point it out." Draco stood there bereft of speech, his head shaking side to side in silent denial.

"I know I've always wondered," Lavender Brown joined in. "His hair is better than mine." She turned to Harry and winked at him.

Not to be left out, Ron added, "I always suspected that myself. I think it was his walk that did it for me. I've never seen a real guy strut like Malfoy does."

As Malfoy started to try to defend himself from a position that was normally looked down upon in the Wizarding World, Ginny cut him off. "It's really OK, Draco. In fact, we're proud of you for coming out like this. That took a lot of ... Oh wait, you don't have any of those between your legs. Uh, guts, yeah, that took a lot of guts. Good for you," she said to him in a fake encouraging voice.

Malfoy looked about wildly for a moment, and Harry knew his opponent saw a number of his fellow Slytherins now starting to slowly back away from him. "You're not going believe them are you? They're making it all up." Harry joyfully noticed that Malfoy's voice had gone up into the girly range and he was blushing furiously.

"Why do we need to make up the truth?" Hermione asked with a straight face. That seemed to seal the discussion, and now more people from the other houses started talking about how Malfoy was gay as they moved toward the exit from the Great Hall.

Looking around, Harry saw his godfather practically beating his head on the table, and the Headmaster was faintly smiling. The short Professor Flitwick was nowhere to be seen; Harry assumed he had fallen underneath the table in laughter. Even his stern head-of-house was holding her hand up in front of her mouth, which Harry suspected was to hide a very uncharacteristic grin. They all had to know how cruel Malfoy had been to everyone over the years, but none more than Harry. The best part of his girlfriend's spurious plan was that this would knock Malfoy down several pegs, at least temporarily, and they had not used a single bad word or hex.

"Gryffindor first years, follow me," Harry said loudly, smirking at Malfoy, and walked off with his girlfriend on his arm. He had no need to look back to know that his friends and the new lion students were following. As they reached the stairs leading to the Gryffindor Tower, the couple turned and looked at each other, an action they had both avoided for the last minute. Unable to contain themselves any longer, they burst out laughing.

"Hey Harry? Did you plan that?" Neville asked with a huge smile on his face. He looked like he had enjoyed getting back at the git who had picked on him for years.

Harry looked at his friend with a huge grin on his face. "Nope, totally spur of the moment. Ginny gave me the first line, she did the second line, and we had fun from there. Thanks for your addition, mate." Harry turned around and found the pretty blonde who had helped them. "Thanks to you too, Lavender, that truly was a choice comment." The girl blushed, though with pride. "You too, Ron," Harry added to his friend who was behind Lavender.

Turning the other way, he found the other prefect. "Hermione, I can't believe you did that, but good on you, too."

"I almost didn't, but then I considered how many times he's called me a Mudblood and I found I couldn't help myself. It was strangely satisfying." They all laughed, even Hermione.

Harry and Hermione helped the first-years into the Tower and gave them a basic explanation of the things they needed to know for the first day or two. With his responsibilities for the evening over with, he returned to the Common Room to find his girlfriend. Since they had nearly an hour until curfew, he grabbed her hand and pulled a giggling Ginny up from her chair by the fire. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Hermione rolled her eyes at them, to which Harry stuck his tongue out at his friend, while Neville just smiled and patted the couch beside him for Hermione to join him. With a wave, Harry left them by themselves, wondering briefly if Ron was up in the fourth year dorm room getting to know Colin Creevey and the other boys from that year.

Finding a secret passage the map had told him of, Harry pulled his favorite girl into it. As he pulled her close, she surprised him by throwing her arms around his neck and jumping up so she could wrap her legs around his waist. Without thinking about what he was doing, Harry reached down under her to help hold her up. He decided immediately that he liked this.

"You, Miss Weasley, have a very nice bum. Did you know that?" he asked and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She laughed and started snogging him. "I do try," she said eventually. "And Harry, that is your new limit."

He squeezed what he was holding. "This?"

"Uh-huh." She nibbled at his lower lip before starting to kiss him again.

Managing to get his lips away from hers, he started trailing kisses up and down her throat, causing her to moan. "If I knew," he started between kisses, "that I'd get to do this," he nibbled some more, "for buying you a broom," he found her ear, "I'd have bought you a broom a long time ago." He lightly laughed in her ear making her squeal.

"I'm glad I know you're teasing me," she told him, "or I'd think you thought I could be bought."

He stopped kissing on her and playfully asked her, "Are you saying that the broom had absolutely no bearing on me getting to touch you a little more?" The teasing smile was still on his face.

Her grin widened. "Nope." At his questioning look, she added, "OK, maybe it made me feel better about the timeframe a little, but the fact that you specifically gave me a broom really didn't change my mind."

"So what made you change your mind? Or what was it that led to this, if you like that better?" he honestly inquired. He pulled her up a bit and repositioned his hands as they had slipped a little. He still liked what he felt.

"I was ready for a little more anyway, first of all. Secondly, it's not the broom per se, but what it represents. I know it's expensive, but that doesn't really matter, even though it's nice to get an expensive present. It's that you knew that would make me happy, and you arranged to get it for me without me knowing about it. At my party, you didn't make a big deal out it. I could tell that you gave it to me just because you wanted to make me happy, because you like me."

"Sorry Gin, but if you want me to be honest, I'd have to say I didn't give it to you because I like you." Harry could tell Ginny almost lost her grip around his neck as his words registered. "It's taken me a long

time to figure this out, but I gave the broom to you because I love you and want you to be happy. There's something about you that seems to fit with me, like we were made for each other."

"You, you love me?"

Harry was surprised she had asked that. "Yes. I thought you felt the same way..."

Ginny pulled herself closer and kissed him again -- a long, lingering, soulful kiss with plenty of moving lips and tongue, which Harry gladly returned in kind. After she had to come up for air, she rested her forehead against his. "I've loved you for a long time, Harry. I've just been waiting for you to admit it."

"You could have told me," he good-naturedly complained. "That would have sped all this up."

She gave him a tender smile. "No, I didn't want you to feel pressured. I wanted the love to be real. I had you as a boyfriend so I didn't mind being patient, letting you discover it on your own."

"I'm sorry, Gin, but I've never really known love before I met your family. It took me a while to figure this out."

"You do realize that this is not the first time you told me that you love me, don't you?" she asked with an impish grin.

Harry felt confused and struggled to remember any other time he had uttered those words. Coming up empty, he could only shake his head and wonder what she was referring to.

A very serious look came over Ginny. "It was during the third task last year, just as Wormtail was about to attack you. You don't remember, do you?"

Again, Harry shook his head. "I ... I remember trying to tell you good-bye, but I don't remember what I said I was so scared."

She nodded, apparently understanding. "I thought as much," she finally told him. "Still, even if you were under a lot of stress and not fully aware of what you were saying, I knew that you cared for me and that too helped me to be patient and wait for you to truly realize how you felt about me. I love you Harry, and I know that somehow, someway, we'll find way to be happy together."

"I know we will Gin. I also know that the reason I'll be happy is because I have you." He gently kissed her as if to seal his feelings.

Ginny enjoyed the emotionally intimate moment immensely. We have three years to wait, she thought to herself, though she knew she could not say that. "It's all right, Harry. We're both in love now and that's good. We also have time to work things out." Deciding words were no longer important for the moment, she pulled herself closer again and starting snogging him.

They barely made it back in time before curfew started. Ginny felt it was going to be a wonderful year, despite it being their OWL year.
(Mon 1 Sep 1997)

"Harry?" Sirius called from the doorway. "This is your last warning. If you don't get up now, you will be sorry."

"Right," The-Boy-Who-Lived mumbled in response. "You and whose army?" He rolled over and saw two fuzzy forms in the doorway to his room, one of which had a lot of red on it.

"He's all yours, sweetheart," the voice said and started to walk away.

Before either of the figures could react, Harry pulled his wand out from under his pillow and cast, "Accio Ginny!" The girl shrieked as she was pulled through the air and landed on the bed. "'Morning gorgeous," he said before he kissed her.

"Eew, morning breath," she said although she did not back away. "It's ten o'clock, Harry. We're supposed to be leaving in half an hour, so get your lazy arse up out of bed."

"Why just me? Look where you are -- in bed, and my bed at that," he teased her. Since she was by the wall, she reacted by using the wall for support and shoving him out of bed. He landed with a thump on the floor in only his boxers, ivory with maroon lions on them. "There's just no pleasing some people," he said as if to himself while he found his glasses and put them on.

"Oh, I don't know, I'm pretty pleased right now. You took a shower last night?"

"Yeah," he replied as he headed for his trunk. "I packed last night, too." He opened his trunk, knowing that his clean clothes for the day were on top already. He pulled the jeans off the top of the neat pile.

"Nice assets you've got there, Potter," she coyly teased him as he bent over the trunk.

He shook his bum a little as he searched for the good shirt. "That reminds me, I need to set a goal for this school year. I think," he stood again and leered at her while still standing in just his boxers and holding his jeans, "getting my hands on two of your best assets is what I should try for."

She laughed at him. "You already play with my hair and my bum, Harry."

"Not the ones I meant." He looked up and down her sixteen-year-old body, his gaze stopping on her chest. She blushed prettily for him.

"They're all yours a year from now, Harry." Apparently spying his shoes on the floor, she slid out her wand out and cast, "Accio black socks! Accio Ginny's green shirt!" A pair of black socks and a green T-shirt came flying out of the trunk. She deftly caught them and laid them on the bed. She grabbed his reading book off of the nightstand and tossed it in his trunk as she got up. With a flick of her wand, the trunk closed. "Hurry up and get dressed and you can have breakfast before you go. Don't forget to brush your teeth, too." With one last spell, she walked out the door to his bedroom, his trunk following her.

"Damn, she's hot," he said to himself.

"And don't you forget it!" he heard from the hallway, followed by a laugh.

Harry quickly got dressed with the clothes she had left him and then visited the bathroom for his morning ritual there. With twenty-five minutes to spare, he hustled two floors down to the kitchen.

Harry had barely walked into the room when he heard his godfather's voice. "Stop! Let me see that shirt. This must be another Ginny Weasley special." Harry stood there because he knew he was not going to get out of this. He heard his godfather read:

Head Boy
Quidditch Captain
White Knight
Nice Guy
...and...

"Turn around, Harry," Ginny sweetly told him as she held her cup of tea she had been slowly sipping. The cup tried and failed to hide the huge grin on her face.

Rolling his eyes, he obeyed, as he knew he was not going to get out of this part either.

Property of
Ginny
Since
1 Sep 1991

There were three loud laughs and a blown kiss from the fourth person. Shaking his head, he grabbed a plate to get some food.

"Technically, he's only been yours for three weeks, Ginny dear," Mrs. Weasley said as she put her tea down and reached for a small pastry.

Harry watched Ginny look at her new engagement ring on her left hand, which he had given her on her birthday three weeks ago. "Legally, that's true, but I think I can claim him from the first time I

saw him. He was mine then even if he didn't know it yet." That led to another round of laughter at Harry's expense. "Besides, he'll really be mine to do whatever I want in about three hundred and fifty days." She grinned evilly at Harry, and he was happy to blow her a kiss in response. Sirius grinned and Molly dropped her head and shook it, probably afraid for his future, Harry surmised.

"Is that the secret shirt you wouldn't let us see when she gave it to you for your birthday last month?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, this is the one. I guess I just thought I was going to hide it. It's so pretentious."

"And you're so modest," his fiancée quipped.

Ron groaned. "It's going to be a long year."

"Maybe," his sister said, "but next year will be worse for you when you're there alone."

Harry saw Ron look at his sister, who was going to be in the seventh year this year with Ron's old friends, while Ron was going to only be in sixth. Harry thought it was rather ironic for their positions to be reversed. "You have a point," Ron conceded, "but at least I'll have friends and won't be home alone."

"Am I that bad?" Mrs. Weasley asked pointedly.

"For a to-be eighteen-year-old boy next year, yeah." Fortunately, Harry thought, Ron had stopped being overly sensitive about his repeating a year, but out of kindness no one stayed on that topic.

"You ready, Pronglet?" Sirius asked Harry as he drained the last of his juice.

"I really wish you'd drop that -- Padfoot," Harry replied with an air of tried patience. "That's your generation. I'm just Harry, all around nice guy, and so forth, just like it says on the shirt."

Sirius let out a bark of laughter. "Leave the plate and go on with you. I'll see you at the school tonight."

"OK, see ya later." Harry helped his girlfriend up and walked over to their stack of trunks. Grabbing his trunk, he stepped into the fireplace while throwing some Floo powder in, and clearly said "King's Cross". He came out of the new Floo station built into the newly remodeled Platform 9 ¾. A moment later his fiancée, her brother, and her mother came out as well.

With an eye open for anything out of the ordinary, they looked around the Wizarding train platform. While Death Eater activity had been almost non-existent for the last year, it did still occasionally happen.

As they slowly made their way towards the train, the recently engaged couple got a number of waves, hellos, and a few laughs because of Harry's shirt. He took it all in stride, promising himself he would get Ginny back for that. Hopefully, repayment would be made in a broom closet, or perhaps on the Astronomy Tower. Of course, he would also have his own room now as Head Boy. He thought about that as he looked at the vivacious redhead next to him, knowing full well that he had a goofy grin on his face.

Mrs. Weasley started giving out hugs to her children, including Harry in the collection. He told her, "See you at Christmas, Mum." He knew she liked to hear that from him.

Getting on the train, they headed for the front and the large prefect compartment. Because she had skipped a year, this was the first year Ginny was a prefect, and only because Hermione was Head Girl. Just before they made it to their destination, he had the misfortune to run into Malfoy and his two ever-present goons.

"Hey scarhead? Want me to sign your shirt so it will be worth something?" the blond Slytherin taunted him.

Harry was still immensely glad Professor Talman had not picked Draco as a prefect. "Malfoy, the only thing I want you to sign is an Azkaban registration card so you can have the cell next to your Death Eater daddy."

"Why, you..."

"Malfoy!" Potter interrupted him. "Don't forget that as Head Boy, I can assign detention this year, and I do plan to enforce the policy on not calling people socially unacceptable names."

Malfoy looked at him with a sneer and then turned. The two Neanderthals with him followed along, probably not sure what else to do. Ginny smiled broadly at Harry as they continued on their way to the prefect compartment.

Soon the train was leaving and the 'all important meeting' was starting. Harry let Hermione run the prefect meeting, as he knew she was better at these things than he was. She was in her element, and he did not want to spoil it for her. He just held Ginny on his lap and made the occasional comment if needed.

What seemed like all too soon, they were at school and the Welcoming Feast was starting. It would be his and Ginny's last year here, and Sirius was still at the Head Table as the DADA professor. Harry wondered how long his godfather would teach after Harry left the school, given he was fairly popular with the students. Of course, Harry also wondered how long Dumbledore would still be Headmaster, as he was getting up there in age.

As the Feast ended, the Headmaster motioned to him, so he sent Ginny on to help the first years and went to see the Headmaster. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Harry. We have one last piece of unfinished business with our friend Tom Riddle. I'd like to take care of that tomorrow afternoon, if you don't mind."

That surprised Harry and pulled him away from the world of normalcy that he had enjoyed for the last two years. He knew the final action with Voldemort had been postponed and that it would have to happen, but he was surprised for it to come now. "You have everything ready?"

"Yes, Harry. Meet me in my office after breakfast tomorrow, at nine. There are some things we need to discuss in private beforehand. You may bring Miss Weasley with you if you like. The actual task will not be until the afternoon. You may also invite Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom, but if so, they should not join us in my office until one. Please tell Miss Granger that classes will be excused as needed. Have a good evening."

Harry nodded and left for Gryffindor Tower. He put the thought of tomorrow afternoon off until then. There was no use worrying about it, as he trusted the headmaster to have done what he said needed to be prepared before Voldemort could be forever destroyed. Instead, he much preferred thinking about his new room, and checking it out with his fiancée in hand. There would be no need for uncomfortable broom closets for snogging, unless they were out somewhere and just could not wait.

(Tue 2 Sep)

Harry had purposefully sat himself and his three best friends at the end of the table for breakfast. After they had their new timetables, Harry pulled out his wand and created a privacy area around only them. Hermione's eyebrows almost disappeared they raised so high at that action.

"Hermione, Neville? This afternoon, we are going to destroy Tom Riddle forever," Harry solemnly announced.

Neville's and Ginny's eyes went wide as they mutely stared at him. Hermione's eyes went wide too, but she also screamed, "What?!"

Harry grinned. "Good thing I put that privacy screen up. Professor Dumbledore told me last night that the ceremony would be this afternoon. Since you two know about him and his secrets, as well as helped research how to find the parts of him, we thought you might like to be there."

"I would. Where is it going to be done?" she asked.

"I don't know, but you two need to be at the Headmaster's office at one sharp if you want to take part. Your classes for the afternoon are excused," Harry explained.

"What about me?" Ginny asked.

He grabbed her hand and held onto it. "You and I are to go up there after breakfast. Apparently he has some other things to tell us, though I don't know what."

Ginny nodded, taking the announcement in stride apparently. Harry did not release her hand, however, but merely put it on his lap under the table. He knew he was silently telling his girlfriend that he was nervous about the meeting, but he needed her comfort more than his pride. Clearly trying to help him out, she smiled at him and whispered in his ear, "I'll be there for you." Harry squeezed her hand in silent thanks, before he took down the privacy charm.

When they had finished breakfast, Harry stood and tugged Ginny up next to him before they headed off. As Head Boy, he always knew the Headmaster's password, so they went straight up to the Headmaster's office.

"Enter!" they heard just as Harry was about to knock. Harry mused that the old man must have some sort of monitoring spell out here to be able to do that. He opened the door so they could go in, as well as closing it behind them.

"Ah, good morning Mr. Potter and," the old man's eye twinkled madly, "the future Mrs. Potter."

Ginny blushed. Harry knew she had not seen the Headmaster since their engagement, but he suddenly had a better understanding why she had been invited to the morning session, beyond what Harry had explained to the others. "Thank you, Professor."

The old wizard pushed a tea service tray towards them. "Please, help yourselves as you desire. I have several things to discuss with you; things that are probably best kept private, though some of it may get

out eventually. Alas, I felt you needed to know everything before this afternoon, Harry."

Harry nodded as he handed his intended a cup of tea and took one for himself.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers, and let a thoughtful look come across his face as he began his story. "I suppose I should start this time with a confession. Harry, if you remember, at the end of your first year, you asked me a question as you lay in the hospital. You asked me why Voldemort had come after you. That question has been echoed several times since, and I have resisted answering it each time. I will now confess to you that I do know the answer."

"What?!" Harry shouted, almost spilling the tea in his hand. A few portraits on the wall protested his reaction, but Harry ignored them.

"The problem I faced was when to tell you the truth, for the moment I told you the answer, it would effectively have ended your childhood. So when was the right time?"

"Sir, I could easily point out that I've never had a childhood, at least as long as I can remember."

The headmaster sighed for a moment. "In one sense, I can understand that logic, and yet, at least while you were here at school, you had something like a childhood. So when was I to rob you of that somewhat carefree life, and replace it with the weight of the world? By the time your fourth year had started and you were mysteriously entered into the Triwizard Tournament, I purposed in my heart to tell you sometime in your fifth year. I could see the Tournament maturing you faster than normal, and my conscience was reminding me you did need to know the answer to your question."

"To do my training, you mean?"

"Yes. For once I answered your question, you would do nothing but training and ignoring a normal life, or so I feared. However, at the end of your fourth year, an event happened that precluded the need for

me to answer your question, and because I had avoided the issue, you had also stopped asking the question."

"You mean the capture of Voldemort?"

"Yes, Harry. By his being imprisoned, the time constraints were removed. There was no longer any need to hurry to answer the question. I could attempt to let you have your desire: to be normal while I took care of other matters for you."

"So what is the answer?" Harry waited slightly impatiently. The build-up fueled his desire to know.

"A few months before you were born, a prophecy was made." Dumbledore quoted the prophecy, and the two teens were in shock.

Ginny came to her senses first and put her arms around Harry. Harry realized this was another reason she was here.

Patiently, the headmaster continued his explanations. "Your scar is of course the mark, Harry. All of the prophecy has been fulfilled, except for one part."

"But, Professor," Ginny objected, "couldn't we say that it was fulfilled at the end of Harry's fourth year?" Harry nodded, still unable to speak, but he thought it was a good question.

The headmaster smiled. "Yes, it is an interesting question that I have pondered over many evenings and several bottles of most potent beverages. Alas, we really don't know. So my point in telling you this is to prepare you for the fact that you may have to do the last deed, Harry. I will attempt to handle it, to relieve you of the burden, but I may not be allowed to, or something may go wrong. I want you to be prepared to handle the situation, but only if it's required."

Harry finally found his voice. "What is the plan?"

"It's quite simple. Shortly after the capture of Tom, I introduced a law into the Wizengamot that condemned Tom to death. It allowed for his capture dead or alive, and if brought in alive, allowed for his

immediate execution with no penalty to the executioner. Some might say I did that for myself, but actually I did that for you, Harry. I was preparing for this day."

"OK, so what do we do?"

"You remember the discussion about the cursed objects that stored parts of Tom's soul?"

Harry nodded as he answered, "Yes. Did he use the artifacts you had us research about the founders?"

The headmaster smiled. "Good deductive work, Harry. Well, I have tracked them all down over the last two years. They are in that box over there." Dumbledore pointed. "There is an artifact in the Ministry called the 'Veil of Death'. Anyone that passes through it will die. Therefore, we merely need to push the objects through the Veil, and then Tom at the end -- rather simple and quite painless for everyone, even Tom. I believe that will also be the easiest thing, conscience-wise, for whichever one of us has to push him through."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "But doesn't that still make one of us a murderer?"

"An interesting moral question," Dumbledore agreed. Leaning forward, he poured himself a cup of tea. After a long sip, he fixed Harry with a stare. "While arguing from analogy is always fraught with peril, Harry, would you say that a person that puts a rabid animal out of its misery is a murderer? Or is that someone actually helping the animal along, helping it out of its pain, and protecting society such that no one else becomes infected?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. Ignoring the obvious answer, he said, "I'd say it depends on whether we enjoy it. That's not the real issue, though. We're not talking about an animal, sir, but another human being."

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, you have found the peril. Nevertheless, that aside, how would you answer the question?"

After more thinking, Harry finally answered, "It's helping the animal along for the greater good and protection of everyone."

"Exactly, and that's how I would like you to think of it if you must do this task. If you wish a different answer, I would say the root question is one of intent, as you suggested earlier. A murderer intends evil; someone, like an Auror, who is protecting others may have to kill, but there is no evil intent -- therefore it is not murder." Checking his twelve-handed watch, Dumbledore smiled. "We've covered the worst part and what I felt needed to be private, and we still have half the morning left plus lunch. Why don't I leave the rest of the time for you to ask questions, and I'll try to answer them as completely as I'm able." With a smile he added, "And you don't have to confine yourself to today's events either."

With a free-for-all question and answer time, Harry and Ginny smiled. Even through lunch, they asked questions about Voldemort, the first war, magic, the castle, and Harry even asked a few about his parents. Harry thought that both he and Ginny enjoyed the uninterrupted time with the old wizard.

At one o'clock, the Headmaster called out "Enter" even though there had been no knock, and his door opened to admit Hermione, Neville, Sirius, and Professors Flitwick, Talman, and McGonagall.

"Excellent, everyone is here." Dumbledore smiled at the assembled. "As we all know each other, we can forgo the introductions. Everyone here has played a vital part that is leading us to the final destruction of Tom Riddle, which we will complete very shortly. If everyone will make themselves comfortable for just a few minutes, Harry and I will go retrieve the last and most important item for our task. Harry?" The man gestured for Harry to follow him. As they stood near Fawkes's perch, Albus held Harry's hand, and when Fawkes took off and flew over the Headmaster's head, the man grabbed a tail feather and the three of them flashed out.

As before, they reappeared in a completely dark place, which soon lit itself as the headmaster flicked his wand about repeatedly. Dumbledore walked over to the cauldron and looked in, where Harry joined him. The two stone pieces were still there as before. Harry

stood back a bit as the headmaster removed the protection ward on the cauldron, before he shrunk it down to be hand-sized and gave it to Harry. Harry then watched the removal of the Fidelius Charm on the area. With a smile, Dumbledore grabbed Harry's hand again and Fawkes flashed them back to the Headmaster's office.

When they returned, Dumbledore looked at Sirius. "Please grab that box over there and bring that with you." The headmaster went over and picked up a Muggle broom that was in the corner and cast "Portus" on it. "Everyone put a hand on the broom, please?" When they did so, Dumbledore tapped his wand on it and said, "Activate."

Harry felt the pull behind his navel and then he was spinning through space and landed in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. In front of them was Madam Amelia Bones, head of the MLE, along with four Aurors.

The head of the MLE welcomed them. "Good afternoon, everyone. Albus, do you have everything you discussed?"

"Yes, Amelia, I do. Shall we get on with it?"

"This way, please." Madam Bones walked next to the Headmaster. "There is a small complication," she quietly told him while they walked.

Harry and Ginny were walking behind the two leaders and overheard the conversation.

"Oh?" Dumbledore did not seem either surprised or bothered.

"Somehow, Cornelius found out about this event and has insisted on being present. If I were to guess, I would say that he heard about the use of the room and hopes to reap political hay from the deed," Bones explained.

"Unfortunate," Dumbledore responded, "but not necessarily bad. We will need to get the word out that the deed is done, and I suppose we could let him be the mouthpiece. As long as the proper people get credit for their work, I don't care who tells the public."

The older woman chuckled as they came to a locked door. "The only thing I'm sure about with Cornelius is that he will want some credit too." She opened the door to a long hallway that led to a round room with many doors. She expertly opened the correct door and continued to lead the party. Finally, they came to a room with stairs that lead to an empty floor, a dais with an arch on it was in the middle of the room. The arch had curtains covering the opening. The Minister for Magic and a few other people were standing on the floor near the dais.

"Amelia? What's this?" Cornelius asked. "I thought this was to get rid of some criminal, but you've brought half of Hogwarts with you."

"Minister," Dumbledore greeted the rotund man in his most congenial voice. "We do have a criminal contained in a box here. I merely invited those who were most instrumental in his capture to witness his departure. You might say it's a victory party of sorts."

"But children, Dumbledore?" the Minister protested.

Harry bristled at that, as he was now seventeen. He noticed that Hermione, Neville, and Ginny seem to have the same feelings on the matter of being called a child. The headmaster seemed to blithely ignore the question and instead directed people to where they needed to be. He and Sirius were sent to the dais, where Harry would have almost sworn he heard very soft voices coming from the archway.

"Harry, if you would do the honors, please? Just step up onto the dais at the edge and toss each of the items in the box Sirius is holding through the center of the arch," Dumbledore directed. "There is a split in the curtain there."

As Harry stepped up, Sirius opened the box for the him. Harry first picked up an old diary. "This too, Professor?"

"Certainly, Harry. Just to be safe, you understand."

"What is this?" Fudge asked. "And who are you putting to death? I haven't seen any issuant from the Wizengamot lately."

"We just have a few cursed objects to get rid of first, Cornelius. As for the person, here's a copy of the decree." Harry saw the headmaster reach into his robes and pull out a rolled-up parchment, which was handed to the Minister.

Harry continued to toss item after item through the curtain in the veil. Emptying the box, he enlarged the cauldron and levitated the snake out.

Dumbledore stopped him. "Harry, put it near the curtain and set it down. I will reanimate it before you banish it through. I think that will be best." Harry followed the directions, and the headmaster turned the stone back into the snake. It immediately started looking around, but Harry levitated it and then banished the snake through the curtain. There was only the final piece left.

"Wait!" Fudge cried. "Are you sure this is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Positive," Dumbledore answered. "Harry, same procedure for the last piece."

"I don't know, Dumbledore." Fudge rolled the parchment back up. "Perhaps we should wait and have something more public for this. We need some reporters for this at the least."

The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot shook his head. "I disagree Minister. Now that we have removed all the curses that held him to this earth, and since we already have his death warrant, I believe we need to get rid of him now. We can crow about the deed all we want afterwards." Harry gestured to regain the headmaster's attention, and pointed to the stone baby near the curtain with Harry at the ready.

"But how do we know that thing is really You-Know-Who? It doesn't look like the way he was described," Fudge protested.

"No, but it is him. You'll hear him in a moment, though he will be quite insane after having been in this transformed state for so long," Dumbledore explained.

"What?" Fudge cried. "You've had him for a long time and are just now doing this? Have you been obstructing justice?"

"On the contrary," Dumbledore responded, "I have been upholding justice. While we did capture and imprison Voldemort," Fudge shivered at the name, "two years ago, it has taken the group assembled here that long to track down all the cursed objects that anchored him to this earth."

"I'm still not sure about doing this right now," Fudge slowly said.

Harry looked at the minister. If he did not know any better, he would have thought the minister was stalling. "Professor, I'm ready."

Without waiting, Dumbledore turned and waved his wand at the stone baby, which came back to life.

"No!" came the high-pitched scream from the hideous baby that should not know how to talk. "I am Lord Voldemort! Bow before me! On your knees, or I shall curse you! Give me your wand and bow!" It continued screaming to be worshiped.

"Silencio!" Dumbledore cast, quieting the screaming.

"No!" Fudge called out. "As Minister for Magic, I command you not to do this!"

"Harry, do it," Dumbledore ordered as he trained his wand on the Minister, while also keeping an eye on the assistants. "You may not countermand the Wizengamot's decree, Minister."

Turning back around, Harry levitated the silenced, but still screaming, baby.

Fudge screamed, "No! Don't do it! He's human too!" Harry saw Fudge start to move forward before Dumbledore stepped in the way.

"Now, Harry, it has to be you while I guard your back," the headmaster said, and Harry thought he could hear a hint of sadness in the voice.

"Sendan!" Harry watched the baby go straight through the crack in the curtain and disappear forever.

Minister Fudge screamed and grabbed his left arm just before he collapsed to the floor. He lay completely still, not even breathing. Everyone was in shock.

Dumbledore sighed. "I was afraid of that." He moved over and raised the left sleeve of the Minister's robes to reveal a bare arm with a black snake-head plainly visible. "I'll assume he had a glamour or something covering that. It explains a great many of his more questionable actions and decisions."

"I'll, uh," Bones started then stopped, still clearly trying to process it all. "I'll have to issue a press release for Voldemort's death, as well as explain that all the Death Eaters have died, including our Minister for Magic." She looked at the visitors. "Thank you, all of you for your service, especially you two, Albus, Harry." She swallowed hard as her gaze returned to the recently deceased Minister, disbelief still written on her face.

"Certainly, Amelia," Dumbledore replied smoothly. "As always, I'm at the service of the Wizengamot. Please let me know when it meets and I shall be there to help with the election of the next minister." He looked to the people he had brought with him. "Shall we return to Hogwarts?" He did not wait for an answer, but turned and started back for the atrium. The others followed him, and Harry felt Ginny take his hand, offering silent support and comfort for what he had just done.

They took the Floo back to the Headmaster's office. As they returned, Harry saw the Headmaster suddenly lose all spring in his step and his face went very sad. "Oh bugger! Severus..." he exclaimed as he heavily dropped into his chair. A tear was already starting to go down the old man's face, Harry noticed. He decided the old wizard would probably desire some privacy, so he led the other students quietly out. When they reached the bottom of the steps, Harry found that all the professors had indeed stayed in the Headmaster's office. Knowing he

and his friends could do nothing to help, he continued to lead them back to their Tower.

(Wed 3 Sep)

As Harry and Ginny joined Neville and Hermione in the Great Hall for breakfast, Hermione saw her friend was not quite his normally cheerful self. "Harry? Are you all right?"

The two newcomers sat and looked at their friends. Neville was working through a stack of pancakes, while Hermione had a bowl of fruit she was picking at and reading the Daily Prophet. There were a lot of smiles and laughs going around the school as everyone else read about Voldemort's quiet demise yesterday, except for at the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was now an orphan as both of his parents had been Death Eaters and a handful of other Slytherins had lost their fathers.

"Mostly," Harry replied. The raised eyebrow from Hermione let him know she expected him to say more. "It's like I told you last night. I don't feel too bad about having to get rid of Tom Riddle and all the Death Eaters, but there is some guilt there."

"You seemed normal last night though," she retorted.

"I think I was still feeling the good news about removing all the evil people. But now," Harry paused to gather his thoughts, "now, I feel I understand what I did a little more. Yes, I helped to rid the world of evil, but even evil people have families and friends who did nothing wrong, people who will miss those who died yesterday when all the Death Eaters died. Those are the ones I'm concerned about."

Hermione considered that. "I think I understand. You should remember, though, that those people made a choice to become a Death Eater knowing it could affect their family, but perhaps this will help you more." She handed over her newspaper. "Be sure to read the whole thing. There are numerous articles about the Death Eaters not being here to terrorize the world anymore, and people are happy. They're saying that they can now live without the fear, they can go do fun things with their families in public. There are a lot of good things

that can happen now, and it's all because of yesterday. Everyone has hope again, and it's because of what you did."

Harry took the paper from her and started reading. He was not sure he liked seeing himself being billed as a hero, as he did not consider himself as such, but Hermione was right. There were a lot of people, normal people on the street and some at the Ministry, who expressed hope. Between that and a hug from Ginny, Harry began feeling a bit better. It would probably be quite some time before he was at peace with it all, but he felt better now than when he got up this morning.

"Come, love," Ginny told him when they had finished breakfast. "Let's go to class and enjoy the school year. We can have fun, I'm sure we'll have many Hogsmeade weekends, and this is our last year here. Once we're done with school, we'll have each other forever come August."

"Thanks, Gin." Harry put his arm around his intended and walked her to class. He decided that in a way, she was exactly correct -- he would rather focus on her and their future, rather than the past.

(Sat 15 Aug 1998)

Harry danced with Ginny, happily lost in the feeling of being together. He was having the time of his life with his new bride, at least until that evening. He had not quite accomplished the goal he had set for himself a year ago, but he had come very close a couple of times when he had caught her in just her bra and knickers before she could cover up. Walking into her room without knocking had been fun and rather educational -- at least as long as he left before she could pick up her wand.

Neville was dancing with Hermione, and Harry was happy for his friends almost as much as he was for himself. They were recently engaged, though Hermione was in no hurry to have the ceremony. She had confided to Harry that she was thinking about advanced schooling.

Neville had a job lined up with the largest nursery in England for magical plants. It was an entry-level position, but he thought he might transition into research and development there, trying to create new

plants. He was quite excited about his job prospects, and Harry thought he had every chance of success.

Due to the Potter fortune, Harry was in no real bind to get a high-paying job, so he and Ginny decided to start their own company. They thought it could be fun to do the opposite of what Bill did, so they would create wards with layered curses, and otherwise set up security for people. His name had already generated interest from many potential clients.

"Ron looks like he's enjoying himself with Mandy," Ginny commented. She continued to watch her old room-mate dance with her brother, so Harry glanced over at them. "I guess the question is will they be able to stay together."

Harry smiled at his wife, marveling that she was now his. "Well, they've been together for the last six months, which is the best he's ever done. My question to you is how long do you think we'll last, Mrs. Potter?"

Ginny pulled him closer so he had to stop moving for a moment, and that let her kiss him quickly. "That's easy, Mr. Potter. We'll be together until death do us part."

He reminisced a few moments more before he told her, "I'm glad you stopped to talk to me in my fourth year, when I was having so much trouble. If you hadn't done that, I'm not sure we would have been together like this."

A chuckle escaped her. "Sure we would, Harry. It just would have taken longer for you to discover me. I knew I was going to end up with you the whole time."

"Really?"

"Really..." Ginny pulled him in for another kiss. Given the shirt she had given him last year, Harry supposed there was no doubt in her mind, Harry had always been hers since the first of September 1991.

(the end)

(A/N: If you haven't read "This Means War!" by Jeconais, you really need to (google for it). It's probably my favorite fanfic story (he's one of my favorite authors too). The gag with Ginny making fun of Draco and trying to take away his power by falsely accusing him of being gay comes from that story, so "Thanks Tim!" for sharing. I've taken the concept and written it to match what I needed here.

Well, I hope you've enjoyed reading this story as much as I've enjoyed writing it. I also hope I surprised you in a few places as well. I want to again thank Josh (moshpit) for helping me by beta'ing this story. He has contributed more than he realizes with his ideas, suggestions, and pointers.

As for future works, I have a couple of shorter stories I'm working on. One will probably be about this size or a little smaller, and the other is a one-shot, but will not be SIYE compliant (I'll post it to my FF dot net account only). Simultaneously, I'm researching and putting together the notes for an "epic-sized" story. I have no idea when this larger story will come out, sorry. The next installment of "Unchampion" will probably come out while I continue to work on this longer story -- so there's hope there for those who have been waiting on more in that storyline. -- kb)